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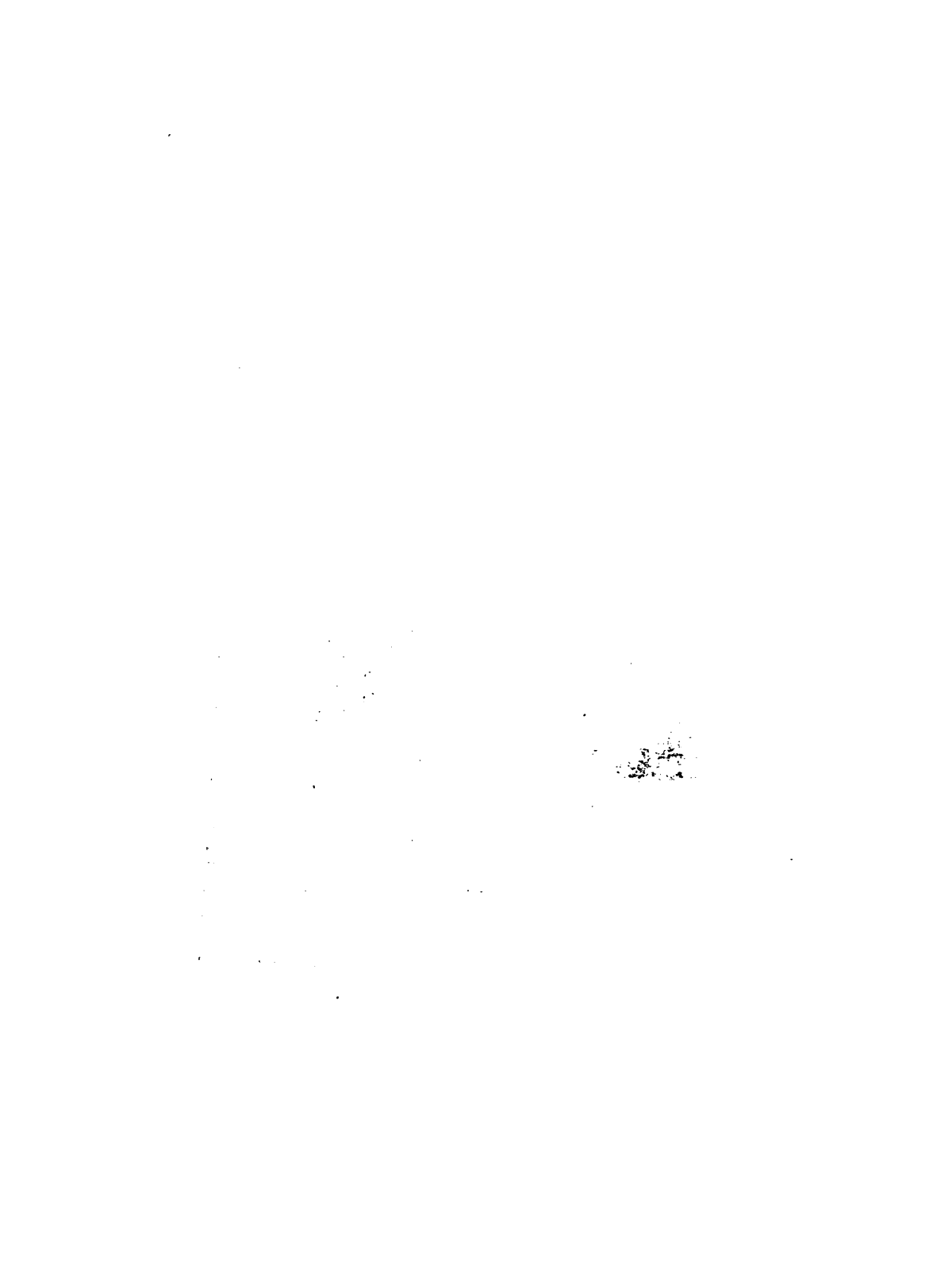
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# THE DARK STAR

12/14/14







**"Karl!"** exclaimed Ilse Dumont.

3

# The Dark Star

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS

Author of "The Girl Philippa," "Who Goes There"  
"The Hidden Children," Etc.



WITH FRONTISPIECE

By W. D. STEVENS

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**TO MY FRIEND  
EDGAR SISSON**

Dans c'métier-là, faut  
rien chercher à comprendre.

**RENÉ BENJAMIN**

## 'ALAK'S SONG

Where are you going,  
Naia?

Through the still noon—  
Where are you going?

To hear the thunder of the sea  
And the wind blowing!—  
To find a stormy moon to comfort me  
Across the dune!

---

Why are you weeping,  
Naia?  
Through the still noon—  
Why are you weeping?

Because I found no wind, no sea,  
No white surf leaping,  
Nor any flying moon to comfort me  
Upon the dune.

---

What did you see there,  
Naia?  
In the still noon—  
What did you see there?

Only the parched world drowsed in drought,  
And a fat bee, there,  
Prying and probing at a poppy's mouth  
That drooped a-swoon.

## ALAK'S SONG

---

What did you hear there,  
Naïa?  
In the still noon—  
What did you hear there?

Only a kestrel's lonely cry  
From the wood near there—  
A rustle in the wheat as I passed by—  
A cricket's rune.

---

Who led you homeward,  
Naïa?  
Through the still noon—  
Who led you homeward?

My soul within me sought the sea,  
Leading me foam-ward:  
But the lost moon's ghost returned with me  
Through the high noon.

---

Where is your soul then,  
Naïa?  
Lost at high noon—  
Where is your soul then?

It wanders East—or West—I think—  
Or near the Pole, then—  
Or died—perhaps there on the dune's dry  
brink  
Seeking the moon.

## THE DARK STAR

"The dying star grew dark; the last light faded from it; went out. Prince Erlik laughed.

"And suddenly the old order of things began to pass away more swiftly.

"Between earth and outer space—between Creator and created, confusing and confounding their identities,—a rushing darkness grew—the hurrying wrack of immemorial storms heralding whirlwinds through which Truth alone survives.

"Awaiting the inevitable reestablishment of such temporary conventions as render the incident of human existence possible, the brooding Demon which men call Truth stares steadily at Tengri under the high stars which are passing too, and which at last shall pass away and leave the Demon watching all alone amid the ruins of eternity."

THE PROPHET OF THE KIOT BORDJIGUEN





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# THE DARK STAR

## PREFACE

### CHILDREN OF THE STAR

NOT the dark companion of Sirius, brightest of all stars—not our own chill and spectral planet rushing toward Vega in the constellation of Lyra—presided at the birth of millions born to corroborate a bloody horoscope.

But a Dark Star, speeding unseen through space, known to the ancients, by them called Erlik, after the Prince of Darkness, ruled at the birth of those myriad souls destined to be engulfed in the earthquake of the ages, or flung by it out of the ordered pathway of their lives into strange byways, stranger highways—into deeps and deserts never dreamed of.

Also one of the dozen odd temporary stars on record blazed up on that day, flared for a month or two, dwindled to a cinder, and went out.

But the Dark Star Erlik, terribly immortal, sped on through space to complete a two-hundred-thousand-year circuit of the heavens, and begin anew an immemorial journey by the will of the Most High.

What spectroscope is to horoscope, destiny is to chance. The black star Erlik rushed through interstellar darkness unseen; those born under its violent augury squaled in their cradles, or, thumb in mouth, ~~slumber~~ the dreamless slumber of the newly born.

## THE DARK STAR

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One of these, a tiny girl baby, fussed and fidgeted in her mother's arms, tortured by prickly heat when the hot winds blew through Trebizond.

Overhead vultures circled; a *stein-adler*, cleaving the blue, looked down where the surf made a thin white line along the coast, then set his lofty course for China.

Thousands of miles to the westward, a little boy of eight gazed out across the ruffled waters of the mill pond at Neeland's Mills, and wondered whether the ocean might not look that way.

And, wondering, with the salt sea effervescence working in his inland-born body, he fitted a cork to his fishing line and flung the baited hook far out across the ripples. Then he seated himself on the parapet of the stone bridge and waited for monsters of the deep to come.

And again, off Seraglio Point, men were rowing in a boat; and a corded sack lay in the stern, horridly and limply heavy.

There was also a box lying in the boat, oddly bound and clamped with metal which glistened like silver under the Eastern stars when the waves of the Bosphorus dashed high, and the flying scud rained down on box and sack and the red-capped rowers.

In Petrograd a little girl of twelve was learning to eat other things than sour milk and cheese; learning to ride otherwise than like a demon on a Cossack saddle; learning deportment, too, and languages, and social graces and the fine arts. And, most thoroughly of all, the little girl was learning how deathless should be her hatred for the Turkish Empire and all its works; and

## *PREFACE*

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how only less perfect than our Lord in Paradise was the Czar on his throne amid that earthly paradise known as "All the Russias."

Her little brother was learning these things, too, in the Corps of Officers. Also he was already proficient on the balalaika.

And again, in the mountains of a conquered province, the little daughter of a gamekeeper to nobility was preparing to emigrate with her father to a new home in the Western world, where she would learn to perform miracles with rifle and revolver, and where the beauty of the hermit thrush's song would startle her into comparing it to the beauty of her own untried voice. But to her father, and to her, the most beautiful thing in all the world was love of Fatherland.

Over these, and millions of others, brooded the spell of the Dark Star. Even the world itself lay under it, vaguely uneasy, sometimes startled to momentary seismic panic. Then, ere mundane self-control restored terrestrial equilibrium, a few mountains exploded, an island or two lay shattered by earthquake, boiling mud and pumice blotted out one city; earth-shock and fire another; a tidal wave a third.

But the world settled down and balanced itself once more on the edge of the perpetual abyss into which it must fall some day; the invisible shadow of the Dark Star swept it at intervals when some far and nameless sun blazed out unseen; days dawned; the sun of the solar system rose furtively each day and hung around the heavens until that dusky huntress, Night, chased him once more beyond the earth's horizon.

## THE DARK STAR

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The shadow of the Dark Star was always there, though none saw it in sunshine or in moonlight, or in the silvery lustre of the planets.

A boy, born under it, stood outside the fringe of willow and alder, through which moved two English setters followed and controlled by the boy's father.

"Mark!" called the father.

Out of the willows like a feathered bomb burst a big grouse, and the green foliage that barred its flight seemed to explode as the strong bird sheered out into the sunshine.

The boy's gun, slanting upward at thirty degrees, glittered in the sun an instant, then the left barrel spoke; and the grouse, as though struck by lightning in mid-air, stopped with a jerk, then slanted swiftly and struck the ground.

"Dead!" cried the boy, as a setter appeared, leading on straight to the heavy mass of feathers lying on the pasture grass.

"Clean work, Jim," said his father, strolling out of the willows. "But wasn't it a bit risky, considering the little girl yonder?"

"Father!" exclaimed the boy, very red. "I never even saw her. I'm ashamed."

They stood looking across the pasture, where a little girl in a pink gingham dress lingered watching them, evidently lured by her curiosity from the old house at the crossroads just beyond.

Jim Neeland, still red with mortification, took the big cock-grouse from the dog which brought it—a tender-mouthed, beautifully trained Belton, who stood with his feathered offering in his jaws, very serious, very proud, awaiting praise from the Neelands, father and son.

## PREFACE

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Neeland senior "drew" the bird and distributed the sacrifice impartially between both dogs—it being the custom of the country.

Neeland junior broke his gun, replaced the exploded shell, content indeed with his one hundred per cent performance.

"Better run over and speak to the little girl, Jim," suggested old Dick Neeland, as he motioned the dogs into covert again.

So Jim ran lightly across the stony, clover-set ground to where the little girl roamed along the old snake fence, picking berries sometimes, sometimes watching the sportsmen out of shy, golden-grey eyes.

"Little girl," he said, "I'm afraid the shot from my gun came rattling rather close to you that time. You'll have to be careful. I've noticed you here before. It won't do; you'll have to keep out of range of those bushes, because when we're inside we can't see exactly where we're firing."

The child said nothing. She looked up at the boy, smiled shyly, then, with much composure, began her retreat, not neglecting any tempting blackberry on the way.

The sun hung low over the hazy Gayfield hills; the beeches and oaks of Mohawk County burned brown and crimson; silver birches supported their delicate canopies of burnt gold; and imperial white pines clothed hill and vale in a stately robe of green.

Jim Neeland forgot the child—or remembered her only to exercise caution in the Brookhollow covert.

The little girl Ruhannah, who had once fidgeted with prickly heat in her mother's arms outside the walls of Trebizond, did not forget this easily smiling, tall young



## THE DARK STAR

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fellow—a grown man to her—who had come across the pasture lot to warn her.

But it was many a day before they met again, though these two also had been born under the invisible shadow of the Dark Star. But the shadow of Erlik is always passing like swift lightning across the Phantom Planet which has fled the other way since Time was born.

*Allahou Ekber, O Tchinguiz Khagan!*

A native Mongol missionary said to Ruhannah's father:

“As the chronicles of the Eighurs have it, long ago there fell metal from the Black Racer of the skies; the first dagger was made of it; and the first image of the Prince of Darkness. These pass from Kurd to Cossack by theft, by gift, by loss; they pass from nation to nation by accident, which is Divine design.

“And where they remain, war is. And lasts until image and dagger are carried to another land where war shall be. But where there is war, only the predestined suffer—those born under Erlik—children of the Dark Star.”

“I thought,” said the Reverend Wilbour Carew, “that my brother had confessed Christ.”

“I am but repeating to you what my father believed; and Temujin before him,” replied the native convert, his remote gaze lost in reflection.

His eyes were quite little and coloured like a lion's; and sometimes, in deep reverie, the corners of his upper lip twitched.

This happened when Ruhannah lay fretting in her mother's arms, and the hot wind blew on Trebizond.

Under the Dark Star, too, a boy grew up in Minetta Lane, not less combative than other ragged boys about

## PREFACE

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him, but he was inclined to arrange and superintend fist fights rather than to participate in battle, except with his wits.

His name was Eddie Brandes; his first fortune of three dollars was amassed at craps; he became a hanger-on in ward politics, at race-tracks, stable, club, squared ring, vaudeville, burlesque. Long Acre attracted him—but always the gambling end of the operation.

Which predilection, with its years of ups and downs, landed him one day in Western Canada with an "Unknown" to match against an Athabasca blacksmith, and a training camp as the prospect for the next six weeks.

There lived there, gradually dying, one Albrecht Dumont, lately head gamekeeper to nobility in the mountains of a Lost Province, and wearing the Iron Cross of 1870 on the ruins of a gigantic and bony chest, now as hollow as a Gothic ruin.

And if, like a thousand fellow patriots, he had been ordered to the Western World to watch and report to his Government the trend and tendency of that Western, English-speaking world, only his Government and his daughter knew it—a child of the Dark Star now grown to early womanhood, with a voice like a hermit thrush and the skill of a sorceress with anything that sped a bullet.

Before the Unknown was quite ready to meet the Athabasca blacksmith, Albrecht Dumont, dying faster now, signed his last report to the Government at Berlin, which his daughter Ilse had written for him—something about Canadian canals and stupid Yankees and their greed, indifference, cowardice, and sloth.

## THE DARK STAR

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Dumont's mind wandered:

"After the well-born Herr Gott relieves me at my post," he whispered, "do thou pick up my burden and stand guard, little Ilse."

"Yes, father."

"Thy sacred promise?"

"My promise."

The next day Dumont felt better than he had felt for a year.

"Ilse, who is the short and broadly constructed American who comes now already every day to see thee and to hear thee sing?"

"His name is Eddie Brandes."

"He is of the fight *gesellschaft*, not?"

"He should gain much money by the fight. A theatre in Chicago may he willingly control, in which light opera shall be given."

"Is it for that he hears so willingly thy voice?"

"It is for that. . . . And love."

"And what of Herr Max Venem, who has asked of me thy little hand in marriage?"

The girl was silent.

"Thou dost not love him?"

"No."

Toward sunset, Dumont, lying by the window, opened his eyes of a dying *Lämmergeier*:

"My Ilse."

"Father?"

"What has thou to this man said?"

"That I will be engaged to him if thou approve."

"He has gained the fight?"

"Today. . . . And many thousand dollars. The

## PREFACE

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theatre in Chicago is his when he desires. Riches, leisure, opportunity to study for a career upon his stage, are mine if I desire."

"Dost thou desire this, little Ilse?"

"Yes."

"And the man Venem who has followed thee so long?"

"I cannot be what he would have me—a *Hausfrau*—to mend his linen for my board and lodging."

"And the Fatherland which placed me here on outpost?"

"I take thy place when God relieves thee."

"*So ist's recht! . . . Grüs Gott—Ilse—*"

Among the German settlers a five-piece brass band had been organised the year before.

It marched at the funeral of Albrecht Dumont, lately head gamekeeper to nobility in the mountains of a long-lost province.

Three months later Ilse Dumont arrived in Chicago to marry Eddie Brandes. One Benjamin Stull was best man. Others present included "Captain" Quint, "Doc" Curfoot, "Parson" Smawley, Abe Gordon—friends of the bridegroom.

Invited by the bride, among others were Theodor Weishelm, the Hon. Charles Wilson, M.P., and Herr Johann Kestner, a wealthy gentleman from Leipsic seeking safe and promising investments in Canada and the United States.

A year later Ilse Dumont Brandes, assuming the stage name of Minna Minti, sang the rôle of *Bettina* in "The Mascotte," at the Brandes Theatre in Chicago.

A year later, when she created the part of *Kathi* in "The White Horse," Max Venem sent word to her the+

## THE DARK STAR

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she would live to see her husband lying in the gutter under his heel. Which made the girl unhappy in her triumph.

But Venem hunted up Abe Grittlefeld and told him very coolly that he meant to ruin Brandes.

And within a month the latest public favourite, Minna Minti, sat in her dressing-room, wet-eyed, enraged, with the reports of Venem's private detectives locked in the drawer of her dressing table, and the curtain waiting.

So complex was life already becoming to these few among the million children of the Dark Star Erlik—to everyone, from the child that fretted in its mother's arms under the hot wind near Trebizond, to a deposed Sultan, cowering behind the ivory screen in his zenana, weeping tears that rolled like oil over his fat jowl to which still adhered the powdered sugar of a Turkish sweetmeat.

Allahou Ekber, *Khodja*; God is great. Great also, *Ande*, is Ali, the Fourth Caliph, cousin-companion of Mahomet the Prophet. But, *O tougtchi*, be thy name Niaz and thy surname Baï, for Prince Erlik speeds on his Dark Star, and beneath the end of the argument between those two last survivors of a burnt-out world—behold! The sword!

## CHAPTER I

### THE WONDER-BOX

As long as she could remember she had been permitted to play with the contents of the late Herr Conrad Wilner's wonder-box. The programme on such occasions varied little; the child was permitted to rummage among the treasures in the box until she had satisfied her perennial curiosity; conversation with her absent-minded father ensued, which ultimately included a personal narrative, dragged out piecemeal from the reticent, dreamy invalid. Then always a few pages of the diary kept by the late Herr Wilner were read as a bedtime story. And bath and bed and dreamland followed. That was the invariable routine, now once more in full swing.

Her father lay on his invalid's chair, reading; his rubber-shod crutches rested against the wall, within easy reach. By him, beside the kerosene lamp, her mother sat, mending her child's stockings and underwear.

Outside the circle of lamplight the incandescent eyes of the stove glowed steadily through the semi-dusk; and the child, always fascinated by anything that aroused her imagination, lifted her gaze furtively from time to time to convince herself that it really was the big, familiar stove which glared redly back at her, and not

## *THE DARK STAR*

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a dragon into which her creative fancy had so often transformed it.

Reassured, she continued to explore the contents of the wonder-box—a toy she preferred to her doll, but not to her beloved set of water-colours and crayon pencils.

Some centuries ago Pandora's box let loose a world of troubles; Herr Wilner's box apparently contained only pleasure for a little child whose pleasures were mostly of her own invention.

It was a curious old box, made of olive wood and bound with bands of some lacquered silvery metal to make it strong—rupee silver, perhaps—strangely wrought with Arabic characters engraved and in shallow relief. It had handles on either side, like a sea-chest; a silver-lacquered lock and hasp which retained traces of violent usage; and six heavy strap hinges of the same lacquered metal.

Within it the little child knew that a most fascinating collection of articles was to be discovered, taken out one by one with greatest care, played with discreetly, and, at her mother's command, returned to their several places in Herr Wilner's box.

There were, in this box, two rather murderous-looking Kurdish daggers in sheaths of fretted silver—never to be unsheathed, it was solemnly understood, except by the child's father.

There was a pair of German army revolvers of the pattern of 1900, the unexploded cartridges of which had long since been extracted and cautiously thrown into the mill pond by the child's mother, much to the surprise, no doubt, of the pickerel and sunfish.

There were writing materials of sandalwood, a few sea shells, a dozen books in German with many steel

## *THE WONDER-BOX*

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plate engravings; also a red Turkish fez with a dark blue tassel; two pairs of gold-rimmed spectacles; several tobacco pipes of Dresden porcelain, a case full of instruments for mechanical drawing, a thick blank book bound in calf and containing the diary of the late Herr Wilner down to within a few minutes before his death.

Also there was a figure in bronze, encrusted with tarnished gold and faded traces of polychrome decoration.

Erlík, the Yellow Devil, as Herr Wilner called it, seemed too heavy to be a hollow casting, and yet, when shaken, something within rattled faintly, as though when the molten metal was cooling a fissure formed inside, into which a few loose fragments of bronze had fallen.

It apparently had not been made to represent any benign Chinese god; the aspect of the yellow figure was anything but benevolent. The features were terrific; scowls infested its grotesque countenance; threatening brows bent inward; angry eyes rolled in apparent fury; its double gesture with sword and javelin was violent and almost humorously menacing. And Ruhannah adored it.

For a little while the child played her usual game of frightening her doll with the Yellow Devil and then rescuing her by the aid of a fairy prince which she herself had designed, smeared with water-colours, and cut out with scissors from a piece of cardboard.

After a time she turned to the remaining treasures in the wonder-box. These consisted of several volumes containing photographs, others full of sketches in pencil and water-colour, and a thick roll of glazed linen scrolls covered with designs in India ink.

The photographs were of all sorts—landscapes, riv-



## THE DARK STAR

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ers, ships in dock, dry dock, and at sea; lighthouses, forts, horses carrying soldiers armed with lances and wearing the red fez; artillery on the march, infantry, groups of officers, all wearing the same sort of fez which lay there in Herr Wilner's box of olive wood.

There were drawings, too—sketches of cannon, of rifles, of swords; drawings of soldiers in various gay uniforms, all carefully coloured by hand. There were pictures of ships, from the sterns of which the crescent flag floated lazily; sketches of great, ugly-looking objects which her father explained were Turkish ironclads. The name "ironclad" always sounded menacing and formidable to the child, and the forbidding pictures fascinated her.

Then there were scores and scores of scrolls made out of slippery white linen, on which had been drawn all sorts of most amazing geometrical designs in ink.

"Plans," her father explained vaguely. And, when pressed by reiterated questions: "Plans for military works, I believe—forts, docks, barracks, fortified cuts and bridges. You are not yet quite old enough to understand, Ruhannah."

"Who did draw them, daddy?"

"A German friend of mine, Herr Conrad Wilner."

"What for?"

"I think his master sent him to Turkey to make those pictures."

"For the Sultan?"

"No; for his Emperor."

"Why?"

"I don't exactly know, Rue."

At this stage of the conversation her father usually laid aside his book and composed himself for the inevitable narrative soon to be demanded of him.

## THE WONDER-BOX

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Then, although having heard the story many times from her crippled father's lips, but never weary of the repetition, the child's eyes would grow round and very solemn in preparation for her next and inevitable question:

"And did Herr Wilner *die*, daddy?"

"Yes, dear."

"Tell me!"

"Well, it was when I was a missionary in the Trebizond district, and your mother and I went——"

"And *me*, daddy? And *me*, too?"

"Yes; you were a little baby in arms. And we all went to Gallipoli to attend the opening of a beautiful new school which was built for little Mohammedan converts to Christianity——"

"Did I see those little Christian children, daddy?"

"Yes, you saw them. But you are too young to remember."

"Tell me. Don't stop!"

"Then listen attentively without interrupting, Rue: Your mother and you and I went to Gallipoli; and my friend, Herr Wilner, who had been staying with us at a town called Tchardak, came along with us to attend the opening of the American school.

"And the night we arrived there was trouble. The Turkish people, urged on by some bad officials in the Sanjak, came with guns and swords and spears and set fire to the mission school.

"They did not offer to harm us. We had already collected our converts and our personal baggage. Our caravan was starting. The mob might not have done anything worse than burn the school if Herr Wilner had not lost his temper and threatened them with a

## THE DARK STAR

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dog whip. Then they killed him with stones, there in the walled yard."

At this point in the tragedy, the eagerly awaited and ardently desired shivers passed up and down the child's back.

"O—oh! Did they kill him *dead*?"

"Yes, dear."

"Was he a martyr?"

"In a way he was a martyr to his duty, I suppose. At least I gather so from his diary and from what he once told me of his life."

"And then what happened? Tell me, daddy."

"A Greek steamer took us and our baggage to Trebizond."

"And what then?"

"And then, a year later, the terrible massacre at our Trebizond mission occurred——"

That was what the child was waiting for.

"I know!" she interrupted eagerly. "The wicked Turks and the cruel Kurds did come galloping and shouting 'Allah!' And all the poor, converted people became martyrs. And God loves martyrs, doesn't He?"

"Yes, dear——"

"And then they did kill all the poor little Christian children!" exclaimed the child excitedly. "And they did cut you with swords and guns! And then the kind sailors with the American flag took you and mamma and me to a ship and saved us by the grace of our Lord Jesus!"

"Yes, dear——"

"Tell me!"

"That is all——"

"No; you walk on two crutches, and you cannot be

## THE WONDER-BOX

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a missionary any more because you are sick all the time! Tell me, daddy!"

"Yes. And that is all, Rue——"

"Oh, no! Please! Tell me! . . . And then, don't you remember how the brave British sailors and our brave American sailors pointed their cannon at the *I-ironclads*, and they said, 'Do not shoot or we shall shoot you to pieces.' And then the brave American sailors went on shore and brought back some poor little wounded converted children, and your baggage and the magic box of Herr Wilner!"

"Yes, dear. And now that is enough tonight——"

"Oh, daddy, you must first read in the di-a-ry which Herr Wilner made!"

"Bring me the book, Rue."

With an interest forever new, the Carew family prepared to listen to the words written by a strange man who had died only a few moments after he had made the last entry in the book—before even the ink was entirely dry on the pages.

The child, sitting cross-legged on the floor, clasped her little hands tightly; her mother laid aside her sewing, folded it, and placed it in her lap; her father searched through the pencilled translation which he had written in between the lines of German script, found where he had left off the time before, then continued the diary of Herr Conrad Wilner, deceased:

*March 5.* My original plans have been sent to the Yildiz Palace. My duplicates are to go to Berlin when a messenger from our Embassy arrives. Murad Bey knows this. I am sorry he knows it. But nobody except myself is aware that I have a third set of plans carefully hidden.

*March 4.* All day with Murad's men setting wire en-

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tanglements under water; two Turkish destroyers patrolling the entrance to the bay, and cavalry patrols on the heights to warn away the curious.

*March 6.* Forts Alamout and Shah Abbas are being reconstructed from the new plans. Wired areas under water and along the coves and shoals are being plotted. Murad Bey is unusually polite and effusive, conversing with me in German and French. A spidery man and very dangerous.

*March 7.* A strange and tragic affair last night. The heat being severe, I left my tent about midnight and went down to the dock where my little sailboat lay, with the object of cooling myself on the water. There was a hot land breeze; I sailed out into the bay and cruised north along the coves which I have wired. As I rounded a little rocky point I was surprised to see in the moonlight, very near, a steam yacht at anchor, carrying no lights. The longer I looked at her the more certain I became that I was gazing at the Imperial yacht. I had no idea what the yacht might be doing here; I ran my sailboat close under the overhanging rocks and anchored. Then I saw a small boat in the moonlight, pulling from the yacht toward shore, where the crescent cove had already been thoroughly staked and the bottom closely covered with barbed wire as far as the edge of the deep channel which curves in here like a scimitar.

It must have been that the people in the boat miscalculated the location of the channel, for they were well over the sunken barbed wire when they lifted and threw overboard what they had come there to get rid of—two dark bulks that splashed.

I watched the boat pull back to the Imperial yacht. A little later the yacht weighed anchor and steamed northward, burning no lights. Only the red reflection tinging the smoke from her stacks was visible. I watched her until she was lost in the moonlight, thinking all the while of those weighted sacks so often dropped overboard along the Bosphorus and off Seraglio Point from that same Imperial yacht.

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When the steamer had disappeared, I got out my sweeps and rowed for the place where the dark objects had been dropped overboard. I knew that they must be resting somewhere on the closely criss-crossed mesh of wires just below the surface of the water; but I probed for an hour before I located anything. Another hour passed in trying to hook into the object with the little three-fluked grapnel which I used as an anchor. I got hold of something finally; a heavy chest of olive wood bound with metal; but I had to rig a tackle before I could hoist it aboard.

Then I cast out again; and very soon my grapnel hooked into what I expected—a canvas sack, weighted with a round shot. When I got it aboard, I hesitated a long while before opening it. Finally I made a long slit in the canvas with my knife. . . .

She was very young—not over sixteen, I think, and she was really beautiful, even under her wet, dark hair. She seemed to be a Caucasian girl—maybe a Georgian. She wore a small gold cross which hung from a gold cord around her neck. There was another, and tighter, cord around her neck, too. I cut the silk bowstring and closed and bound her eyes with my handkerchief before I rowed out a little farther and lowered her into the deep channel which cuts eastward here like the scimitar of that true believer, Abdul Hamid.

Then I hoisted sail and beat up slowly toward my little dock under a moon which had become ghastly under the pallid aura of a gathering storm—

“A poor dead young lady!” interrupted the child, clasping her hands more tightly. “Did the Sultan kill her, daddy?”

“It seems so, Ruhannah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. He was a very cruel and wicked Sultan.”

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"I don't see why he killed the beautiful poor de lady."

"If you will listen and not interrupt, you shall learn why."

"And was the chest that Herr Wilner pulled up the very same chest that is here on the floor beside me?" insisted the child.

"The very same. Now listen, Rue, and I shall read a little more in Herr Wilner's diary, and then you must have your bath and be put to bed——"

"Please read, daddy!"

The Reverend Wilbour Carew turned the page and quietly continued:

*March 20.* In my own quarters at Trebizond again, and rid of Murad for a while.

A canvas cover and rope handles concealed the character of my olive wood chest. I do not believe anybody suspects it to be anything except one of the various boxes containing my own personal effects. I shall open it tonight with a file and chisel, if possible.

*March 21.* The contents of the chest reveal something of the tragedy. The box is full of letters written in Russian, and full of stones which weigh collectively a hundred pounds at least. There is nothing else in the chest except a broken Ikon and a bronze figure of Erlik, a Yildiz relic, no doubt, of some Kurdish raid into Mongolia, and probably placed beside the dead girl by her murderers in derision. I am translating the letters and arranging them in sequence.

*March 25.* I have translated the letters. The dead girl's name was evidently Tatyana, one of several children of some Cossack chief or petty prince, and on the eve of her marriage to a young officer named Mitya, the Kurds raided the town. They carried poor Tatyana off along with her wedding chest—the chest I fished up with my grapnel.

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In brief, the chest and the girl found their way into Abdul's seraglio. The letters of the dead girl—which were written and entrusted probably to a faithless slave, but which evidently never left the seraglio—throw some light on the tragedy, for they breathe indignation and contempt of Islam, and call on her affianced, on her parents, and on her people to rescue her and avenge her.

And after a while, no doubt Abdul tired of reading fierce, unreconciled little Tatyana's stolen letters, and simply ended the matter by having her bowstrung and dumped overboard in a sack, together with her marriage chest, her letters, and the Yellow Devil in bronze as a final insult.

She seems to have had a sister, Naïa, thirteen years old, betrothed to a Prince Mistchenka, a cavalry officer in the Terek Cossacks. Her father had been Hetman of the Don Cossacks before the Emperor Nicholas reserved that title for Imperial use. And *she* ended in a sack off Gallipoli! That is the story of Tatyana and her wedding chest.

*March 29.* Murad arrived, murderously bland and assiduous in his solicitude for my health and comfort. I am almost positive he knows that I fished up something from Cove No. 37 under the theoretical guns of theoretical Fort Osman, both long plotted out but long delayed.

*April 5.* My duplicate plans for Gallipoli have been stolen. I have a third set still. Colonel Murad Bey is not to be trusted. My position is awkward and is becoming serious. There is no faith to be placed in Abdul Hamid. My credentials, the secret agreement with my Government, are no longer regarded even with toleration in the Yildiz Kiosque. A hundred insignificant incidents prove it every day. And if Abdul dare not break with Germany it is only because he is not yet ready to defy the Young Turk party. The British Embassy is very active and bothers me a great deal.

*April 10.* My secret correspondence with Enver Bey has been discovered, and my letters opened. This is a



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very bad business. I have notified my Government that the Turkish Government does not want me here; that the plan of a Germanised Turkish army is becoming objectionable to the Porte; that the duplicate plans of our engineers for the Dardanelles and the Gallipoli Peninsula have been stolen.

*April 13.* A secret interview with Enver Bey, who promises that our ideas shall be carried out when his party comes into power. Evidently he does not know that my duplicates have been stolen.

Troubles threaten in the Vilayet of Trebizond, where is an American Mission. I fear that our emissaries and the emissaries of Enver Bey are deliberately fomenting disorders because Americans are not desired by our Government. Enver denies this; but it is idle to believe anyone in this country.

*April 16.* Another interview with Enver Bey. His scheme is flatly revolutionary, namely, the deposition of Abdul, a secret alliance, offensive and defensive, with us; the Germanisation of the Turkish army and navy; the fortification of the Gallipoli district according to our plans; a steadily increasing pressure on Serbia; a final reckoning with Russia which is definitely to settle the status of Albania and Serbia and leave the Balkan grouping to be settled between Austria, Germany, and Turkey.

I spoke several times about India and Egypt, but he does not desire to arouse England unless she interferes.

I spoke also of Abdul Hamid's secret and growing fear of Germany, and his increasing inclination toward England once more.

No trace of my stolen plans. The originals are in the Yildiz Palace. I have a third set secreted, about which nobody knows.

*April 21.* I have been summoned to the Yildiz Palace. It possibly means my assassination. I have confided my box of data, photographs, and plans, to the Reverend Wilbour Carew, an American missionary in the Trebizond sanjak.

There are rumours that Abdul has become mentally

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unhinged through dread of assassination. One of his own aides-de-camp, while being granted an audience in the Yildiz, made a sudden and abrupt movement to find his handkerchief; and Abdul Hamid whipped out a pistol and shot him dead. This is authentic.

*April 30.* Back at Tchardak with my good missionary and his wife. A strange interview with Abdul. There were twenty French clocks in the room, all going and all striking at various intervals. The walls were set with French mirrors.

Abdul's cordiality was terrifying; the full original set of my Gallipoli plans was brought in. After a while, the Sultan reminded me that the plans were in duplicate, and asked me where were these duplicates. What duplicity! But I said pleasantly that they were to be sent to General Staff Headquarters in Berlin.

He pretended to understand that this was contrary to the agreement, and insisted that the plans should first be sent to him for comparison. I merely referred him to his agreement with my Government. But all the while we were talking I was absolutely convinced that the stolen duplicates were at that moment in the Yildiz Kiosque. Abdul must have known that I believed it. Yet we both merely smiled our confidence in each other.

He seemed to be unusually good-natured and gracious, saying that no doubt I was quite right in sending the plans to Berlin. He spoke of Enver Bey cordially, and said he hoped to be reconciled to him and his friends very soon. When Abdul Hamid becomes reconciled to anybody who disagrees with him, the latter is *always* dead.

He asked me where I was going. I told him about the plans I was preparing for the Trebizond district. He offered me an escort of Kurdish cavalry, saying that he had been told the district was not very safe. I thanked him and declined his escort of assassins.

I saw it all very plainly. Like a pirate captain, Abdul orders his crew to dig a secret hole for his

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treasure, and when the hole is dug and the treasure hidden, he murders the men who hid it for him, so that they shall never betray its location. I am one of those men. That is what he means for me, who have given him his Gallipoli plans. No wonder that in England they call him Abdul the Damned!

*May 3.* In the Bazaar at Tchardak yesterday two men tried to stab me. I got their daggers, but they escaped in the confusion. Murad called to express horror and regret. Yes; regret that I had not been murdered.

*May 5.* I have written to my Government that my usefulness here seems to be ended; that my life is in hourly danger; that I desire to be more thoroughly informed concerning the relations between Berlin and the Yildiz Palace.

*May 6.* I am in disgrace. My Government is furious because my correspondence with Enver Bey has been stolen. The Porte has complained about me to Berlin; Berlin disowns me, disclaims all knowledge of my political activities outside of my engineering work.

This is what failure to carry out secret instructions invariably brings—desertion by the Government from which such instructions are received. In diplomacy, failure is a crime never forgiven. Abandoned by my Government I am now little better than an outlaw here. Two courses remain open to me—to go back in disgrace and live obscurely for the remainder of my life, or to risk my life by hanging on desperately here with an almost hopeless possibility before me of accomplishing something to serve my Government and rehabilitate myself.

The matter of the stolen plans is being taken up by our Ambassador at the Sublime Porte. The British Embassy is suspected. What folly! I possess a third set of plans. Our Embassy ought to send to Trebizond for them. I don't know what to do.

*May 12.* A letter I wrote May 10 to the German Embassy has been stolen. I am now greatly worried about the third set of plans. It seems safest to include the box containing them among the baggage of the

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American missionary, the Reverend Wilbour Carew; and, too, for me to seek shelter with him.

As I am now afraid that an enemy may impersonate an official of the German Embassy, I have the missionary's promise that he will retain and conceal the contents of my box until I instruct him otherwise. I am practically in hiding at his house, and in actual fear of my life.

*May 15.* The missionary and his wife and baby travel to Gallipoli, where an American school for girls is about to be opened.

Today, in a café, I noticed that the flies, swarming on the edge of my coffee cup, fell into the saucer dead. I did not taste my coffee.

*May 16.* Last night a shot was fired through my door. I have decided to travel to Gallipoli with the missionary.

*May 18.* My groom stole and ate an orange from my breakfast tray. He is dead.

*May 20.* The Reverend Mr. Carew and his wife are most kind and sympathetic. They are good people, simple, kindly, brave, faithful, and fearlessly devoted to God's service in this vile land of treachery and lies.

*May 21.* I have confessed to the Reverend Mr. Carew as I would confess to a priest in holy orders. I have told him all under pledge of secrecy. I told him also that the sanctuary he offers might be violated with evil consequences to him; and that I would travel as far as Gallipoli with him and then leave. But the kind, courageous missionary and his wife insist that I remain under the protection which he says the flag of his country affords me. If I could only get my third set of plans out of the country!

*May 22.* Today my coffee was again poisoned. I don't know what prevented me from tasting it—some vague premonition. A pariah dog ate the bread I soaked in it, and died before he could yelp.

It looks to me as though my end were inevitable. Today I gave my bronze figure of Erlik, the Yellow Devil, to Mrs. Carew to keep as a dowry for her little daughter, now a baby in arms. If it is hollow,

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as I feel sure, there are certain to be one or two jewels in it. And the figure itself might bring five hundred marks at an antiquary's.

*May 30.* Arrived at the Gallipoli mission. Three Turkish ironclads lying close inshore. A British cruiser, the *Cobra*, and an American cruiser, the *Oneida*, appeared about sunset and anchored near the ironclads. The bugles on deck were plainly audible. If a German warship appears I shall carry my box on board. My only chance to rehabilitate myself is to get the third set of plans to Berlin.

*June 1.* In the middle of the religious exercises with which the new school is being inaugurated, cries of "Allah" come from a great crowd which has gathered. From my window where I am writing I can see how insolent the attitude of this Mohammedan riffraff is becoming. They spit upon the ground—a pebble is tossed at a convert—a sudden shout of "Allah"—pushing and jostling—a lighted torch blazes! I take my whip of rhinoceros hide and go down into the court to put a stop to this insolence—

Her father slowly closed the book.

"Daddy! Is that where poor Herr Wilner died?"

"Yes, dear."

After a silence his wife said thoughtfully:

"I have always considered it very strange that the German Government did not send for Herr Wilner's papers."

"Probably they did, Mary. And very probably Murad Bey told them that the papers had been destroyed."

"And you never believed it to be your duty to send the papers to the German Government?"

"No. It was an unholy alliance that Germany sought with that monster Abdul. And when Enver Pasha seized the reins of government such an alliance would have been none the less unholy. You know and so do I that if Germany did not actually incite the Armenian massa-

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eres she at least was cognisant of preparations made to begin them. Germany is still hostile to all British or American missions, all Anglo-Saxon influence in Turkey.

“No; I did not send Herr Wilner’s papers to Berlin; and the events of the last fifteen years have demonstrated that I was right in withholding them.”

His wife nodded, laid aside her work basket, and rose.

“Come, Ruhannah,” she said with decision; “put everything back into the wonder-box.”

And, stooping, she lifted and laid away in it the scowling, menacing Yellow Devil.

And so, every month or two, the wonder-box was opened for the child to play with, the same story told, extracts from the diary read; but these ceremonies, after a while, began to recur at lengthening intervals as the years passed and the child grew older.

And finally it was left to her to open the box when she desired, and to read for herself the pencilled translation of the diary, which her father had made during some of the idle and trying moments of his isolated and restricted life. And, when she had been going to school for some years, other and more vivid interests replaced her dolls and her wonder-box; but not her beloved case of water-colours and crayon pencils.

## CHAPTER II

### BROOKHOLLOW

THE mother, shading the candle with her work-worn hand, looked down at the child in silence. The subdued light fell on a freckled cheek where dark lashes rested, on a slim neck and thin shoulders framed by a mass of short, curly chestnut hair.

Though it was still dark, the mill whistle was blowing for six o'clock. Like a goblin horn it sounded ominously through Ruhannah's dream. She stirred in her sleep; her mother stole across the room, closed the window, and went away carrying the candle with her.

At seven the whistle blew again; the child turned over and unclosed her eyes. A brassy light glimmered between leafless apple branches outside her window. Through the frosty radiance of sunrise a blue jay screamed.

Ruhannah cuddled deeper among the blankets and buried the tip of her chilly nose. But the grey eyes remained wide open and, under the faded quilt, her little ears were listening intently.

Presently from the floor below came the expected summons:

"Ruhannah!"

"Oh, *please*, mother!"

"It's after seven——"

"I know: I'll be ready in time!"

"It's after seven, Rue!"

"I'm so cold, mother dear!"

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"I closed your window. You may bathe and dress down here."

"B-r-r-r! I can see my own breath when I breathe!"

"Come down and dress by the kitchen range," repeated her mother. "I've warm water all ready for you."

The brassy light behind the trees was becoming golden; slim bluish shadows already stretched from the base of every tree across frozen fields dusted with snow.

As usual, the lank black cat came walking into the room, its mysterious crystal-green eyes brilliant in the glowing light.

Listening, the child heard her father moving heavily about in the adjoining room.

Then, from below again:

"Ruhannah!"

"I'm going to get up, mother!"

"Rue! Obey me!"

"I'm *up!* I'm on my way!" She sprang out amid a tempest of bedclothes, hopped gingerly across the chilly carpet, seized her garments in one hand, comb and toothbrush in the other, ran into the hallway and pattered downstairs.

The cat followed leisurely, twitching a coal-black tail.

"Mother, could I have my breakfast first? I'm so hungry——"

Her mother turned from the range and kissed her as she huddled close to it. The sheet of zinc underneath warmed her bare feet delightfully. She sighed with satisfaction, looked wistfully at the coffeepot simmering, sniffed at the biscuits and sizzling ham.

"Could I have one little taste before I——"



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"Come, dear. There's the basin. Bathe quickly, now."

Ruhannah frowned and cast a tragic glance upon the tin washtub on the kitchen floor. Presently she stole over, tested the water with her finger-tip, found it not unreasonably cold, dropped the night-dress from her frail shoulders, and stepped into the tub with a perfunctory shiver—a thin, overgrown child of fifteen, with pipestem limbs and every rib anatomically apparent.

Her hair, which had been cropped to shoulder length, seemed to turn from chestnut to bronze fire, gleaming and crackling under the comb which she hastily passed through it before twisting it up.

"Quickly but thoroughly," said her mother. "Hasten, Rue."

Ruhannah seized soap and sponge, gasped, shut her grey eyes tightly, and fell to scrubbing with the fury of despair.

"Don't splash, dear——"

"Did you warm my towel, mother?"—blindly stretching out one thin and dripping arm.

Her mother wrapped her in a big crash towel from head to foot.

Later, pulling on stockings and shoes by the range, she managed to achieve a buttered biscuit at the same time, and was already betraying further designs upon another one when her mother sent her to set the table in the sitting-room.

Thither sauntered Ruhannah, partly dressed, still dressing.

By the nickel-trimmed stove she completed her toilet, then hastily laid the breakfast cloth and arranged the china and plated tableware, and filled the water pitcher.

Her father came in on his crutches; she hurried from

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the table, syrup jug in one hand, cruet in the other, and lifted her face to be kissed; then she brought hot plates, coffeepot, and platters, and seated herself at the table where her father and mother were waiting in silence.

When she was seated her father folded his large, pallid, bony hands; her mother clasped hers on the edge of the table, bowing her head; and Ruhannah imitated them. Between her fingers she could see the cat under the table, and she watched it arch its back and gently rub against her chair.

“For what we are about to receive, make us grateful, Eternal Father. This day we should go hungry except for Thy bounty. Without presuming to importune Thee, may we ask Thee to remember all who awake hungry on this winter day. . . . Amen.”

Ruhannah instantly became very busy with her breakfast. The cat beside her chair purred loudly and rose at intervals on its hind legs to twitch her dress; and Ruhannah occasionally bestowed alms and conversation upon it.

“Rue,” said her mother, “you should try to do better with your algebra this week.”

“Yes, I do really mean to.”

“Have you had any more bad-conduct marks?”

“Yes, mother.”

Her father lifted his mild, dreamy eyes of an invalid. Her mother asked:

“What for?”

“For wasting my time in study hour,” said the girl truthfully.

“Were you drawing?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Rue! Again! Why do you persist in drawing pic-

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tures in your copy books when you have an hour's lesson in drawing every week? Besides, you may draw pictures at home whenever you wish."

"I don't exactly know why," replied the girl slowly. "It just happens before I notice what I am doing. . . . Of course," she explained, "I do recollect that I oughtn't to be drawing in study hour. But that's after I've begun, and then it seems a pity not to finish."

Her mother looked across the table at her husband: "Speak to her seriously, Wilbour."

The Reverend Mr. Carew looked solemnly at his long-legged and rapidly growing daughter, whose grey eyes gazed back into her father's sallow visage.

"Rue," he said in his colourless voice, "try to get all you can out of your school. I haven't sufficient means to educate you in drawing and in similar accomplishments. So get all you can out of your school. Because, some day, you will have to help yourself, and perhaps help us a little."

He bent his head with a detached air and sat gazing mildly at vacancy—already, perhaps, forgetting what the conversation was about.

"Mother?"

"What, Rue?"

"What am I going to do to earn my living?"

"I don't know."

"Do you mean I must go into the mill like everybody else?"

"There are other things. Girls work at many things in these days."

"What kind of things?"

"They may learn to keep accounts, help in shops——"

"If father could afford it, couldn't I learn to do

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something more interesting? What do girls work at whose fathers can afford to let them learn how to work?"

"They may become teachers, learn stenography and typewriting; they can, of course, become dressmakers; they can nurse——"

"Mother!"

"Yes?"

"Could I choose the business of drawing pictures? I know how!"

"Dear, I don't believe it is practical to——"

"Couldn't I draw pictures for books and magazines? Everybody says I draw very nicely. You say so, too. Couldn't I earn enough money to live on and to take care of you and father?"

Wilbour Carew looked up from his reverie:

"To learn to draw correctly and with taste," he said in his gentle, pedantic voice, "requires a special training which we cannot afford to give you, Ruhannah."

"Must I wait till I'm twenty-five before I can have my money?" she asked for the hundredth time. "I do so need it to educate myself. Why did grandma do such a thing, mother?"

"Your grandmother never supposed you would need the money until you were a grown woman, dear. Your father and I were young, vigorous, full of energy; your father's income was ample for us then."

"Have I got to marry a man before I can get enough money to take lessons in drawing with?"

Her mother's drawn smile was not very genuine. When a child asks such questions no mother finds it easy to smile.

"If you marry, dear, it is not likely you'll marry in order to take lessons in drawing. Twenty-five is not

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old. If you still desire to study art you will be able to do so."

"Twenty-five!" repeated Rue, aghast. "I'll be an old woman."

"Many begin their life's work at an older age——"

"Mother! I'd rather marry somebody and begin to study art. Oh, *don't* you think that even now I could support myself by making pictures for magazines? Don't you, mother dear?"

"Rue, as your father explained, a special course of instruction is necessary before one can become an artist——"

"But I *do* draw very nicely!" She slipped from her chair, ran to the old secretary where the accumulated masterpieces of her brief career were treasured, and brought them for her parents' inspection, as she had brought them many times before.

Her father looked at them listlessly; he did not understand such things. Her mother took them one by one from Ruhannah's eager hands and examined these grimy records of her daughter's childhood.

There were drawings of every description in pencil, in crayon, in mussy water-colours, done on scraps of paper of every shape and size. The mother knew them all by heart, every single one, but she examined each with a devotion and an interest forever new.

There were many pictures of the cat; many of her parents, too—odd, shaky, smeared portraits all out of proportion, but usually recognisable.

A few landscapes varied the collection—a view or two of the stone bridge opposite, a careful drawing of the ruined paper mill. But the majority of the subjects were purely imaginary; pictures of demons and angels, of damsels and fairy princes—paragons of

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beauty—with castles on adjacent crags and swans adorning convenient ponds.

Her mother rose after a few moments, laid aside the pile of drawings, went to the kitchen and returned with her daughter's schoolbooks and lunch basket.

"Rue, you'll be late again. Get on your rubbers immediately."

The child's shabby winter coat was already too short in skirt and sleeve, and could be lengthened no further. She pulled the blue toboggan cap over her head, took a hasty osculatory leave of her father, seized books and lunch basket, and followed her mother to the door.

Below the house the Brookhollow road ran south across an old stone bridge and around a hill to Gayfield, half a mile away.

Rue, drawing on her woollen gloves, looked up at her mother. Her lip trembled very slightly. She said:

"I shouldn't know what to do if I couldn't draw pictures. . . . When I draw a princess I mean her for myself. . . . It is pleasant—to pretend to live with swans."

She opened the door, paused on the step; the frosty breath drifted from her lips. Then she looked back over her shoulder; her mother kissed her, held her tightly for a moment.

"If I'm to be forbidden to draw pictures," repeated the girl, "I don't know what will become of me. Because I really live there—in the pictures I make."

"We'll talk it over this evening, darling. Don't draw in study hour any more, will you?"

"I'll try to remember, mother."

When the spindle-limbed, boyish figure had sped away beyond sight, Mrs. Carew shut the door, drew her wool

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shawl closer, and returned slowly to the sitting-room. Her husband, deep in a padded rocking-chair by the window, was already absorbed in the volume which lay open on his knees—the life of the Reverend Adoniram Judson—one of the world's good men. Ruhannah had named her cat after him.

His wife seated herself. She had dishes to do, two bedrooms, preparations for noonday dinner—the usual and unchangeable routine. She turned and looked out of the window across brown fields thinly powdered with snow. Along a brawling, wintry-dark stream, fringed with grey alders, ran the Brookhollow road. Clumps of pines and elms bordered it. There was nothing else to see except a distant crow in a ten-acre lot, walking solemnly about all by himself.

. . . Like the vultures that wandered through the compound that dreadful day in May . . . she thought involuntarily.

But it was a far cry from Trebizond to Brookhollow. And her husband had been obliged to give up after the last massacre, when every convert had been dragged out and killed in the floating shadow of the Stars and Stripes, languidly brilliant overhead.

For the Sublime Porte and the Kurds had had their usual way at last; there was nothing left of the Mission; school and converts were gone; her wounded husband, her baby, and herself refugees in a foreign consulate; and the Turkish Government making apologies with its fat tongue in its greasy cheek.

The Koran says: "Woe to those who pray, and in their prayers are careless."

The Koran also says: "In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful: What thinkest thou of him who treateth our religion as a lie?"

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Mrs. Carew and her crippled husband knew, now, what the Sublime Porte thought about it, and what was the opinion of the Kurdish cavalry concerning missionaries and converts who treated the Moslem religion as a lie.

She looked at her pallid and crippled husband; he was still reading; his crutches lay beside him on the floor. She turned her eyes to the window. Out there the solitary crow was still walking busily about in the frozen pasture. And again she remembered the vultures that hulked and waddled amid the débris of the burned Mission.

Only that had been in May; and above the sunny silence in that place of death had sounded the unbroken and awful humming of a million million flies. . . .

And so, her husband being now hopelessly broken and useless, they had come back with their child, Ruhannah, to their home in Brookhollow.

Here they had lived ever since; here her grey life was passing; here her daughter was already emerging into womanhood amid the stark, unlovely environments of a country crossroads, arid in summer, iron naked in winter, with no horizon except the Gayfield hills, no outlook save the Brookhollow road. And that led to the mill.

She had done what she could—was still doing it. But there was nothing to save. Her child's destiny seemed to be fixed.

Her husband corresponded with the Board of Missions, wrote now and then for the *Christian Pioneer*, and lived on the scanty pension allowed to those who, like himself, had become incapacitated in line of duty. There was no other income.



## THE DARK STAR

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There was, however, the six thousand dollars left to Ruhannah by her grandmother, slowly accumulating interest in the Mohawk Bank at Orangeville, the county seat, and not to be withdrawn, under the terms of the will, until the day Ruhannah married or attained, unmarried, her twenty-fifth year.

Neither principal nor interest of this legacy was available at present. Life in the Carew family at Brookhollow was hard sledding, and bid fair to continue so indefinitely.

The life of Ruhannah's father was passed in reading or in gazing silently from the window—a tall, sallow, bearded man with the eyes of a dreaming martyr and the hands of an invalid—who still saw in the winter sky, across brown, snow-powdered fields, the minarets of Trebizond.

In reading, in reflection, in dreaming, in spiritual acquiescence, life was passing in sombre shadows for this middle-aged man who had been hopelessly crushed in Christ's service; and who had never regretted that service, never complained, never doubted the wisdom and the mercy of his Leader's inscrutable manœuvres with the soldiers who enlist to follow Him. As far as that is concerned, the Reverend Wilbour Carew had been born with a believing mind; doubt of divine goodness in Deity was impossible for him; doubt of human goodness almost as difficult.

Such men have little chance in a brisk, busy, and jaunty world; but they prefer it should be that way with them. And of these few believers in the goodness of God and man are our fools and gentlemen composed.

On that dreadful day, the Kurd who had mangled him so frightfully that he recovered only to limp

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through life on crutches bent over him and shouted in his face:

“Now, you Christian dog, before I cut your throat show me how this Christ of yours can be a god!”

“Is it necessary,” replied the missionary faintly, “to light a candle in order to show a man the midday sun?”

Which was possibly what saved his life, and the lives of his wife and child. Your Moslem adores and understands such figurative answers. So he left the Reverend Mr. Carew lying half dead in the blackened doorway and started cheerfully after a frightened convert praying under the compound wall.

## CHAPTER III

### IN EMBRYO

A CHILD on the floor, flat on her stomach in the red light of the stove, drawing pictures; her mother by the shaded lamp mending stockings; her father reading; a faint odour of kerosene from the glass lamp in the room, and the rattle of sleet on roof and window; this was one of her childhood memories which never faded through all the years of Ruhannah's life.

Of her waking hours she preferred that hour after supper when, lying prone on the worn carpet, with pencil and paper, just outside the lamp's yellow circle of light, her youthful imagination kindled and caught fire.

For at that hour the magic of the stove's glowing eyes transformed the sitting-room chairs to furtive watchers of herself, made of her mother's worktable a sly and spidery thing on legs, crouching in ambush; bewitched the ancient cottage piano so that its ivory keys menaced her like a row of monstrous teeth.

She adored it all. The tall secretary stared at her with owlish significance. Through that neutral veil where lamplight and shadow meet upon the wall, the engraved portrait of a famous and godly missionary peered down at her out of altered and malicious eyes; the claw-footed, haircloth sofa was a stealthy creature offering to entrap her with wide, inviting arms; three folded umbrellas leaned over the edge of their shadowy stand, looking down at her like scrawny and baleful

## IN EMBRYO

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birds, ready to peck at her with crooked handles. And as for Adoniram, her lank black cat, the child's restless creative fancy was ever transforming him from goblin into warlock, from hydra to hippogriff, until the earnestness of pretence sent agreeable shivers down her back, and she edged a trifle nearer to her mother.

But when pretence became a bit too real and too grotesque she had always a perfect antidote. It was merely necessary to make a quick picture of an angel or two, a fairy prince, a swan, and she felt herself in their company, and delightfully protected.

There was a night when the flowing roar of the gale outside filled the lamplit silence; when the snow was drifting level with the window sills; when Adoniram, unable to prowl abroad, lay curled up tight and sound asleep beside her where she sat on the carpet in the stove radiance. Wearied of drawing castles and swans, she had been listening to her father reading passages aloud from the book on his knees to her mother who was sewing by the lamp.

Presently he continued his reading:

"I asked Alaro the angel: 'Which place is this, and which people are these?'"

"And he answered: 'This place is the star-track; and these are they who in the world offered no prayers and chanted no liturgies. Through other works they have attained felicity.'"

Her mother nodded, continuing to sew. Ruhannah considered what her father had read, then:

"Father?"

"Yes——" He looked down at her absently.

"What were you reading?"

"A quotation from the Sacred Anthology."

## THE DARK STAR

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"Isn't prayer really necessary?"

Her mother said:

"Yes, dear."

"Then how did those people who offered no prayers go to Heaven?"

Her father said:

"Eternal life is not attained by praise or prayer alone, Ruhannah. Those things which alone justify prayer are also necessary."

"What are they?"

"What we really *think* and what we *do*—both only in Christ's name. Without these nothing else counts very much—neither form nor convention nor those individual garments called creed and denomination, which belief usually wears throughout the world."

Her mother, sewing, glanced gravely down at her daughter:

"Your father is very tolerant of what other people believe—as long as they really do believe. Your father thinks that Christ would have found friends in Buddha and Mahomet."

"Do such people go to Heaven?" asked Ruhannah, astonished.

"Listen," said her father, reading again:

"I came to a place and I saw the souls of the liberal, adorned above all other souls in splendour. And it seemed to me sublime.

"I saw the souls of the truthful who walked in lofty splendour. And it seemed to me sublime.

"I saw the souls of teachers and inquirers; I saw the friendly souls of interceders and peacemakers; and these walked brilliantly in the light. And it seemed to me sublime——"

He turned to his wife:

## IN EMBRYO

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“To see and know *is* sublime. We know, Mary; and Ruhannah is intelligent. But in spite of her faith in what she has learned from us, like us she must one day travel the common way, seeking for herself the reasons and the evidences of immortality.”

“Perhaps her faith, Wilbour——”

“Perhaps. But with the intelligent, faith, which is emotional, usually follows belief; and belief comes only from reasoning. I think that Ruhannah is destined to travel the way of all intelligence when she is ready to think for herself.”

“I am ready now,” said the girl. “I have faith in our Lord Jesus, and in my father and mother.”

Her father looked at her:

“It is good building material. Some day, God willing, you shall build a very lofty temple with it. But the foundation of the temple must first be certain. Intelligence ultimately requires reasons for belief. You will have to seek them for yourself, Ruhannah. Then, on them build your shrine of faith; and nothing shall shake it down.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And I cannot explain. Only this; as you grow older, all around you in the world you will become aware of people, countless millions and millions of people, asking themselves—ready with the slightest encouragement, or without it, to ask you the question which is the most vital of all questions to them. And whatever way it is answered always they ask for evidence. You, too, will one day ask for evidence. All the world asks for it. But few recognise it as evidence when it is offered.”

He closed his book and dropped a heavy hand upon it.

## *THE DARK STAR*

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"Amid the myriad pursuits and interests and trades and professions of the human race, amid their multitudinous aspirations, perplexities, doubts, passions, endeavours, deep within every intelligent man remains one dominant desire, one persistent question to be answered if possible."

"What desire, father?"

"The universal desire for another chance—for immortality. Man's never-ending demand for evidence of an immortality which shall terminate for him the most tremendous of all uncertainties, which shall solve for him the most vital of all questions: What is to become of him after physical death? Is he to live again? Is he to see once more those whom he loved the best?"

Ruhannah sat thinking in the red stove light, cross-legged, her slim ankles clasped in either hand.

"But our souls are immortal," she said at last.

"Yes."

"Our Lord Jesus has said it."

"Yes."

"Then why should anybody not believe it?"

"Try to believe it always. Particularly after your mother and I are no longer here, try to believe it. . . . You are unusually intelligent; and if some day your intelligence discovers that it requires evidence for belief seek for that evidence. It is obtainable. Try to recognise it when you encounter it. . . . Only, in any event, remember this: never alter your early faith, never destroy your childhood's belief until evidence to prove the contrary convinces you."

"No. . . . There is no such evidence, is there, father?"

"I know of none."

"Then," said the girl calmly, "I shall take Christ's

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evidence that I shall live again if I do no evil. . . .  
Father?"

"Yes."

"Is there any evidence that Adoniram has no soul?"

"I know of none."

"Is there any that he has a soul?"

"Yes, I think there is."

"Are you sure?"

"Not entirely."

"I wonder," mused the girl, looking gravely at the sleeping cat.

It was the first serious doubt that Ruhannah had ever entertained in her brief career.

That night she dreamed of the Yellow Devil in Herr Wilner's box, and, awaking, remembered her dream. It seemed odd, too, because she had not even thought of the Yellow Devil for over a year.

But the menacing Mongol figure seemed bound to intrude into her life once more and demand her attention as though resentful of long oblivion and neglect; for, a week later, an old missionary from Indo-China—a native Chinese—who had lectured at the Baptist Church in Gayfield the evening previous, came to pay his respects to the Reverend Wilbour Carew. And Rue had taken the Yellow Devil from the olive-wood box that day and was busily making a pencil drawing of it.

At sight of the figure the native missionary's narrow almond eyes opened extremely wide, and he leaned on the table and regarded the bronze demon very intently.

Then he took from his pocket and adjusted to his button nose a pair of large, horn spectacles; and he carefully examined the Chinese characters engraved on the base of the ancient bronze, following them slowly with a yellow and clawlike forefinger.



## THE DARK STAR

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"Can you read what is written there?" inquired the Reverend Mr. Carew.

"Yes, brother. This is what is written: 'I am Erlik, Ruler of Chaos and of All that Was. The old order passes when I arrive. I bring confusion among the peoples; I hurl down emperors; kingdoms crumble where I pass; the world begins to rock and tip, spilling nations into outer darkness. When there are no more kingdoms and no more kings; no more empires and no emperors; and when only the humble till, the blameless sow, the pure reap; and when only the teachers teach in the shadow of the Tree, and when the Thinker sits unstirring under the high stars, then, from the dark edges of the world I let go my grasp and drop into those immeasurable deeps from which I came—I, Erlik, Ruler of All that Was.'"

After a silence the Reverend Mr. Carew asked whether the figure was a very old one.

"It is before the period called 'Han'—a dynasty during which the Mongols were a mighty people. This inscription is Mongol. Erlik was the Yellow Devil of the Mongols."

"Not a heathen god, then?"

"No, a heathen devil. Their Prince of Darkness."

Ruhannah, pencil in hand, looked curiously at this heathen Prince of Darkness, arrived out of the dark ages to sit to her for his scowling portrait.

"I wonder what he thinks of America," she said, partly to herself.

The native missionary smiled, picked up the Yellow Devil, shook the figure, listening.

"There is something inside," he said; "perhaps jewels. If you drilled a hole in him you could find out."

The Reverend Mr. Carew nodded absently:

## IN EMBRYO

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“Yes ; it might be worth while,” he said.

“If there is a jewel,” repeated the missionary, “you had better take it, then cast away the figure. Erlik brings disaster to the land where his image is set up.”

The Reverend Mr. Carew smiled at his Chinese and Christian confrère’s ineradicable vein of superstition.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE TRODDEN WAY

**THERE** came the indeterminate year when Ruha finished school and there was no money available to her elsewhere for further embellishment, no far horizon than the sky over the Gayfield hills, no perspective than the main street of Gayfield with knitting mill at the end of it.

So into Gayfield Mill the girl walked, and found place immediately among the unskilled. And her career appeared to be predetermined now, and her destiny simple one—to work, to share the toil and the gain of Gayfield with the majority of the other girls she knew; to marry, ultimately, some boy, some clerk, one of the Gayfield stores, some farmer lad, perhaps possibly a school teacher or a local lawyer or physician or possibly the head of some department in the office or maybe a minister—she was sufficiently well bred and educated for any one of these.

The winter of her seventeenth year found her very much a child at heart, physically backward, a adolescent, a little shy, inclined to silences, somewhat sensitive to all beauty, and passionately expressive of herself only when curled up by the stove with her feet in the basket and the red light of the coals falling athwart her slim hand that guided it.

She went sometimes to village parties, learned easily to dance, had no preferences among the young

## THE TRODDEN WAY

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of Gayfield, no romances. For that matter, while she was liked and even furtively admired, her slight shyness, reticence, and a vague, indefinite something about her seemed to discourage familiar rustic gallantry. Also, she was as thin and awkward as an overgrown lad, not thought to be pretty, known to be poor. But for all that more than one young man was vaguely haunted at intervals by some memory of her grey eyes and the peculiar sweetness of her mouth, forgetting for the moment several freckles on the delicate bridge of her nose and several more on her sun-tanned cheeks.

She had an agreeable time that winter, enchanted to learn dancing, happy at "showers" and parties, at sleigh rides and "chicken suppers," and the various species of village gaiety which ranged from moving pictures every Thursday and Saturday nights to church entertainments, amateur theatricals at the town hall, and lectures under the auspices of the aristocratic D. O. F.—Daughters of the Old Frontier.

But she never saw any boy she preferred to any other, never was conscious of being preferred, excepting once—and she was not quite certain about that.

It was old Dick Neeland's son, Jim—vaguely understood to have been for several years in Paris studying art—and who now turned up in Gayfield during Christmas week.

Ruhannah remembered seeing him on several occasions when she was a little child. He was usually tramping across country with his sturdy father, Dick Neeland of Neeland's Mills—an odd, picturesque pair with their setter dogs and burnished guns, and old Dick's face as red as a wrinkled winter apple, and his hair snow-white.

There was six years' difference between their ages,

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Jim Neeland's and hers, and she had always considered him a grown and formidable man in those days. But that winter, when somebody at the movies pointed him out to her, she was surprised to find him no older than the other youths she skated with and danced with.

Afterward, at a noisy village party, she saw him dancing with every girl in town, and the drop of Irish blood in this handsome, careless young fellow established him at once as a fascinating favourite.

Rue became quite tremulous over the prospect of dancing with him. Presently her turn came; she rose with a sudden odd loss of self-possession as he was presented, stood dumb, shy, unresponsive, suffered him to lead her out, became slowly conscious that he danced rather badly. But awe of him persisted even when he trod on her slender foot.

He brought her an ice afterward, and seated himself beside her.

"I'm a clumsy dancer," he said. "How many times did I spike you?"

She flushed and would have found a pleasant word to reassure him, but discovered nothing to say, it being perfectly patent to them both that she had retired from the floor with a slight limp.

"I'm a steam roller," he repeated carelessly. "But you dance very well, don't you?"

"I have only learned to dance this winter."

"I thought you an expert. Do you live here?"

"Yes. . . . I mean I live at Brookhollow."

"Funny. I don't remember you. Besides, I don't know your name—people mumble so when they introduce a man."

"I'm Ruhannah Carew."

"Carew," he repeated, while a crease came between

## THE TRODDEN WAY

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his eyebrows. "Of Brookhollow—— Oh, I know! Your father is the retired missionary—red house facing the bridge."

"Yes."

"Certainly," he said, taking another look at her; "you're the little girl daddy and I used to see across the fields when we were shooting woodcock in the willows."

"I remember you," she said.

"I remember *you!*"

She coloured gratefully.

"Because," he added, "dad and I were always afraid you'd wander into range and we'd pepper you from the bushes. You've grown a lot, haven't you?" He had a nice, direct smile though his speech and manners were a trifle breezy, confident, and *sans façon*. But he was at that age—which succeeds the age of bumpiousness—with life and career before him, attainment, realisation, success, everything the mystery of life holds for a young man who has just flung open the gates and who takes the magic road to the future with a stride instead of his accustomed pace.

He was already a man with a profession, and meant that she should become aware of it.

Later in the evening somebody told her what a *personage* he had become, and she became even more deeply thrilled, impressed, and tremulously desirous that he should seek her out again, not venturing to seek him, not dreaming of encouraging him to notice her by glance or attitude—not even knowing, as yet, how to do such things. She thought he had already forgotten her existence.

But that this thin, freckled young thing with grey

## THE DARK STAR

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eyes ought to learn how much of a man he was remained somewhere in the back of Neeland's head; and when he heard his hostess say that somebody would have to see Rue Carew home, he offered to do it. And presently went over and asked the girl if he might—not too patronisingly.

In the cutter, under fur, with the moonlight electrically brilliant and the world buried in white, she ventured to speak of his art, timidly, as in the presence of the very great.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I studied in Paris. Wish I were back there. But I've got to draw for magazines and illustrated papers; got to make a living, you see. I teach at the Art League, too."

"How happy you must be in your career!" she said, devoutly meaning it, knowing no better than to say it.

"It's a business," he corrected her, kindly.

"But—yes—but it is art, too."

"Oh, art!" he laughed. It was the fashion that year to shrug when art was mentioned—reaction from too much gabble.

"We don't busy ourselves with art; we busy ourselves with business. When they use my stuff I feel I'm getting on. You see," he admitted with reluctant honesty, "I'm young at it yet—I haven't had very much of my stuff in magazines yet."

After a silence, cursed by an instinctive truthfulness which always spoiled any little plan to swagger:

"I've had several—well, about a dozen pictures reproduced."

One picture accepted by any magazine would have awed her sufficiently. The mere fact that he was an artist had been enough to impress her.

## THE TRODDEN WAY

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"Do you care for that sort of thing—drawing, painting, I mean?" he inquired kindly.

She drew a quick breath, steadied her voice, and said she did.

"Perhaps you may turn out stuff yourself some day."

She scarcely knew how to take the word "stuff." Vaguely she surmised it to be professional vernacular.

She admitted shyly that she cared for nothing so much as drawing, that she longed for instruction, but that such a dream was hopeless.

At first he did not comprehend that poverty barred the way to her; he urged her to cultivate her talent, bestowed advice concerning the Art League, boarding houses, studios, ways, means, and ends, until she felt obliged to tell him how far beyond her means such magic splendours lay.

He remained silent, sorry for her, thinking also that the chances were against her having any particular talent, consoling a heart that was unusually sympathetic and tender with the conclusion that this girl would be happier here in Brookhollow than scratching around the purlieus of New York to make both ends meet.

"It's a tough deal," he remarked abruptly. "—I mean this art stuff. You work like the dickens and kick your heels in ante-rooms. If they take your stuff they send you back to alter it or redraw it. I don't know how anybody makes a living at it—in the beginning."

"Don't *you?*"

"I? No." He reddened; but she could not notice it in the moonlight. "No," he repeated; "I have an allowance from my father. I'm new at it yet."

"Couldn't a man—a girl—support herself by draw-



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ing pictures for magazines?" she inquired tremulously.

"Oh, well, of course there are some who have arrived—and they manage to get on. Some even make wads, you know."

"W-wads?" she repeated, mystified.

"I mean a lot of money. There's that girl on the *Star*, Jean Throssel, who makes all kinds of wealth, they say, out of her spidery, filmy girls in ringlets and cheesecloth dinner gowns."

"Oh!"

"Yes, Jean Throssel, and that Waythorne girl, Belinda Waythorne, you know—does all that stuff for *The Looking Glass*—futurist graft, no mouths on her people—she makes *hers*, I understand."

It was rather difficult for Rue to follow him amid the vernacular mazes.

"Then, of course," he continued, "men like Alexander Fairless and Philip Lightwood who imitates him, make fortunes out of their drawing. I could name a dozen, perhaps. But the rest—hard sledding, Miss Carew!"

"Is it *very* hard?"

"Well, I don't know what on earth I'd do if dad didn't back me as his fancy."

"A father ought to, if he can afford it."

"Oh, I'll pay my way some day. It's in me. I feel it; I know it. I'll make plenty of money," he assured her confidently.

"I'm sure you will."

"Thank you," he smiled. "My friends tell me I've got it in me. I have one friend in particular—the Princess Mistchenka—who has all kinds of confidence in my future. When I'm blue she bolsters me up. She's quite wonderful. I owe her a lot for asking me to her Sunday nights and for giving me her friendship."

## THE TRODDEN WAY

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"A—a princess?" whispered the girl, who had drawn pictures of thousands but was a little startled to realise that such fabled creatures really exist.

"Is she *very* beautiful?" she added.

"She's tremendously pretty."

"Her—clothes are very beautiful, I suppose," ventured Rue.

"Well—they're very—smart. Everything about her is smart. Her Sunday night suppers are wonderful. You meet people who do things—all sorts—everybody who is *somebody*."

He turned to her frankly:

"I think myself very lucky that the Princess Mistchenka should be my friend, because, honestly, Miss Carew, I don't see what there is in me to interest such a woman."

Rue thought she could see, but remained silent.

"If I had my way," said Neeland, a few moments later, "I'd drop illustrating and paint battle scenes. But it wouldn't pay, you see."

"Couldn't you support yourself by painting battles?"

"Not yet," he said honestly. "Of course I have hopes—intentions——" he laughed, drew his reins; the silvery chimes clashed and jingled and flashed in the moonlight; they had arrived.

At the door he said:

"I hope some day you'll have a chance to take lessons. Thank you for dancing with me. . . . If you ever do come to New York to study, I hope you'll let me know."

"Yes," she said, "I will."

He was halfway to his sleigh, looked back, saw her looking back as she entered the lighted doorway.

## *THE DARK STAR*

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"Good night, Rue," he said impulsively, warmly sorry for her.

"Good night," she said.

The drop of Irish blood in him prompted him to go back to where she stood framed in the lighted doorway. And the same drop was no doubt responsible for his taking her by the waist and tilting back her head in its fur hood and kissing her soft, warm lips.

She looked up at him in a flushed, bewildered sort of way, not resisting; but his eyes were so gay and mischievous, and his quick smile so engaging that a breathless, uncertain smile began to edge her lips; and it remained stamped there, stiffening even after he had jumped into his cutter and had driven away, jingling joyously out into the dazzling moonshine.

In bed, the window open, and the covers pulled to her chin, Rue lay wakeful, living over again the pleasures of the evening; and Neeland's face was always before her open eyes, and his pleasant voice seemed to be sounding in her ears. As for the kiss, it did not trouble her. Girls she went with were not infrequently so saluted by boys. That, being her own first experience, was important only in that degree. And she shyly thought the experience agreeable. And, as she recalled, revived, and considered all that Neeland had said, it seemed to her that this young man led an enchanted life and that such as he were indeed companions fit for princesses.

"Princess Mistchenka," she repeated aloud to herself. And somehow it sounded vaguely familiar to the girl, as though somewhere, long ago, she had heard another voice pronounce the name.

## CHAPTER V

### EX MACHINA

AFTER she had become accustomed to the smell of rancid oil and dyestuffs and the interminable racket of machinery she did not find her work at the knitting mill disagreeable. It was like any work, she imagined, an uninteresting task which had to be done.

The majority of the girls and young men of the village worked there in various capacities; wages were fair, salaries better, union regulations prevailed. There was nothing to complain of.

And nothing to expect except possible increase in wages, holidays, and a disquieting chance of getting caught in the machinery, which familiarity soon discounted.

As for the social status of the mill workers, the mill *was* Gayfield; and Gayfield was a village where the simpler traditions of the Republic still survived; where there existed no invidious distinction in vocations; a typical old-time community harbouring the remains of a Grand Army Post and too many churches of too many denominations; where the chance metropolitan stranger was systematically "done"; where distrust of all cities and desire to live in them was equalled only by a passion for moving pictures and automobiles; where the school trustees used double negatives and traced their ancestry to Colonial considerables—who, however, had signed their names in "lower case" or with a Maltese cross—the world in miniature, with its d

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proportion of petty graft, petty squabbles, envy, kindness, jealousy, generosity, laziness, ambition, stupidity, intelligence, honesty, hypocrisy, hatred, affection, badness and goodness, as standardised by the code established according to folk-ways on earth—in brief, a perfectly human community composed of the usual ingredients, worthy and unworthy—that was Gayfield, Mohawk County, New York.

Before spring came—before the first robin appeared, and while icy roads still lay icy under sunlit pools of snow-water—a whole winter indoors, and a sedentary one, had changed the smoothly tanned and slightly freckled cheeks of Rue Carew to a thinner and paler oval. Under her transparent skin a tea-rose pink came and went; under her grey eyes lay bluish shadows. Also, floating particles of dust, fleecy and microscopic motes of cotton and wool filling the air in the room where Ruhannah worked, had begun to irritate her throat and bronchial tubes; and the girl developed an intermittent cough.

When the first bluebird arrived in Gayfield the cough was no longer intermittent; and her mother sent her to the village doctor. So Rue Carew was transferred to the box factory adjoining, in which the mill made its own paper boxes, where young women sat all day at intelligent machines and fed them with squares of pasteboard and strips of gilt paper; and the intelligent and grateful machines responded by turning out hundreds and hundreds of complete boxes, all neatly gilded, pasted, and labelled. And after a little while Ruhannah was able to nourish one of these obliging and responsive machines. And by July her cough had left her, and two delicate freckles adorned the 'bridge of her nose.

## EX MACHINA

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The half-mile walk from and to Brookhollow twice a day was keeping her from rapid physical degeneration. Yet, like all northern American summers, the weather became fearfully hot in July and August, and the half-mile even in early morning and at six in the evening left her listless, nervously dreading the great concrete-lined room, the reek of glue and oil, the sweaty propinquity of her neighbours, and the monotonous appetite of the sprawling machine which she fed all day long with pasteboard squares.

She went to her work in early morning, bareheaded, in a limp pink dress very much open at the throat, which happened to be the merciful mode of the moment—a slender, sweet-lipped thing, beginning to move with grace now—and her chestnut hair burned gold-pale by the sun.

There came that movable holiday in August, when the annual shutdown for repairs closed the mill and box factory during forty-eight hours—a matter of prescribing oil and new bearings for the overfed machines so that their digestions should remain unimpaired and their dispositions amiable.

It was a hot August morning, intensely blue and still, with that slow, subtle concentration of suspended power in the sky, ominous of thunder brooding somewhere beyond the western edges of the world.

Ruhannah aided her mother with the housework, picked peas and a squash and a saucer full of yellow pansies in the weedy little garden, and, at noon, dined on the trophies of her husbandry, physically and æsthetically.

After dinner, dishes washed and room tidied, she sat down on the narrow, woodbine-infested verandah with

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pencil and paper, and attempted to draw the stone bridge and the little river where it spread in deeps and shallows above the broken dam.

Perspective was unknown to her; of classic composition she was also serenely ignorant, so the absence of these in her picture did not annoy her. On the contrary, there was something hideously modern and recessional in her vigorous endeavour to include in her drawing everything her grey eyes chanced to rest on. She even arose and gently urged a cow into the already overcrowded composition, and, having accomplished its portrait with Cezanne-like fidelity, was beginning to look about for Adoniram to include him also, when her mother called to her, holding out a pair of old gloves.

"Dear, we are going to save a little money this year. Do you think you could catch a few fish for supper?"

The girl nodded, took the gloves, laid aside her pencil and paper, picked up the long bamboo pole from the verandah floor, and walked slowly out into the garden.

A trowel was sticking in the dry earth near the flower bed, where poppies, and pansies, and petunias, and phlox bordered the walk.

Under a lilac the ground seemed moister and more promising for vermicular investigation; she drew on her gloves, dug a few holes with the trowel, extracted an angleworm, frowned slightly, holding it between gloved fingers, regarding its contortions with pity and aversion.

To bait a hook was not agreeable to the girl; she managed to do it, however, then shouldering her pole she walked across the road and down to the left, through rank grasses and patches of milkweed, bergamot, and queen's lace, scattering a cloud of brown and silver-spotted butterflies.

## EX MACHINA

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Alder, elder, and Indian willow barred her way; rank thickets of jewelweed hung vivid blossoming drops across her path; woodbine and clematis trailed dainty snares to catch her in their fairy nets; a rabbit scurried out from behind the ruined paper mill as she came to the swift, shallow water below the dam.

Into this she presently plumped her line, and the next instant jerked it out again with a wriggling, silvery minnow flashing on the hook.

Carrying her pole with its tiny, glittering victim dangling aloft, Rue hastily retraced her steps to the road, crossed the bridge to the further end, seated herself on the limestone parapet, and, swinging her pole with both hands, cast line and hook and minnow far out into the pond. It was a business she did not care for—this extinguishing of the life-spark in anything. But, like her mill work, it appeared to be a necessary business, and, so regarding it, she went about it.

The pond above the half-ruined dam lay very still; her captive minnow swam about with apparently no discomfort, trailing on the surface of the pond above him the cork which buoyed the hook.

Rue, her pole clasped in both hands between her knees, gazed with preoccupied eyes out across the water. On the sandy shore, a pair of speckled tip-ups ran busily about, dipping and bobbing, or spread their white, striped wings to sheer the still surface of the pond, swing shoreward with bowed wings again, and resume their formal, quaint, and busy manners.

From the interstices of the limestone parapet grew a white bluebell—the only one Rue had ever seen. As long as she could remember it had come up there every year and bloomed, snow-white amid a world of its bl comrades in the grass below. She looked for it



## *THE DARK STAR*

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saw it in bud—three sturdy stalks sprouting at right angles from the wall and curving up parallel to it. Somehow or other she had come to associate this white freak of nature with herself—she scarcely knew why. It comforted her, oddly, to see it again, still surviving, still delicately vigorous, though where among those stone slabs it found its nourishment she never could imagine.

The intense blue of the sky had altered since noon; the west became gradually duller and the air stiller; and now, over the Gayfield hills, a tall cloud thrust up silvery-edged convolutions toward a zenith still royally and magnificently blue.

She had been sitting there watching her swimming cork for over an hour when the first light western breeze arrived, spreading a dainty ripple across the pond. Her cork danced, drifted; beneath it she caught the momentary glimmer of the minnow; then the cork was jerked under; she clasped the pole with all her strength, struck upward; and a heavy pickerel, all gold and green, sprang furiously from the water and fell back with a sharp splash.

Under the sudden strain of the fish she nearly lost her balance, scrambled hastily down from the parapet, propping the pole desperately against her body, and stood so, unbending, unyielding, her eyes fixed on the water where the taut line cut it at forty-five degrees.

At the same time two men in a red runabout speeding westward caught sight of the sharp turn by the bridge which the ruins of the paper mill had hidden. The man driving the car might have made it even then had he not seen Ruhannah in the centre of the bridge. It was instantly all off; so were both mud-guards and one

## EX MACHINA

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wheel. So were driver and passenger, floundering on their backs among the rank grass and wild flowers. Ruhannah, petrified, still fast to her fish, gazed at the catastrophe over her right shoulder.

A broad, short, squarely built man of forty emerged from the weeds, went hastily to the car and did something to it. Noise ceased; clouds of steam continued to ascend from the crumpled hood.

The other man, even shorter, but slimmer, sauntered out of a bed of milkweed whither he had been catapulted. He dusted with his elbow a grey felt hat as he stood looking at the wrecked runabout; his comrade, still clutching a cigar between his teeth, continued to examine the car.

"Hell!" remarked the short, thickset man.

"It's going to rain like it, too," added the other. The thunder boomed again beyond Gayfield hills.

"What do you know about this!" growled the thickset man, in utter disgust. "Do we hunt for a garage, or what?"

"It's up to you, Eddie. And say! What was the matter with you? Don't you know a bridge when you see one?"

"That damn girl——" He turned and looked at Ruhannah, who was dragging the big flapping pickerel over the parapet by main strength.

The men scowled at her in silence, then the one addressed as Eddie rolled his cigar grimly into the left corner of his jaw.

"Damn little skirt," he observed briefly. "It seems to worry her a lot what she's done to us."

"I wonder does she know she wrecked us," suggested the other. He was a stunted, wiry little man of thirty-five. His head seemed slightly too large; he had

## THE DARK STAR

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pasty face with the sloe-black eyes, button nose, and the widely chiselled mouth of a circus clown.

The eyes of the short, thickset man were narrow and greyish green in a round, smoothly shaven face. They narrowed still more as the thunder broke louder from the west.

Ruhannah, dragging her fish over the grass, was coming toward them; and the man called Eddie stepped forward to bar her progress.

"Say, girlie," he began, the cigar still tightly screwed into his cheek, "is there a juice mill anywhere near us, d'y'know?"

"What?" said Rue.

"A garage."

"Yes; there is one at Gayfield."

"How far, girlie?"

Rue flushed, but answered:

"It is half a mile to Gayfield."

The other man, noticing the colour in Ruhannah's face, took off his pearl-grey hat. His language was less grammatical than his friend's, but his instincts were better.

"Thank you," he said—his companion staring all the while at the girl without the slightest expression. "Is there a telephone in any of them houses, miss?"—glancing around behind him at the three edifices which composed the crossroads called Brookhollow.

"No," said Rue.

It thundered again; the world around had become very dusky and silent and the flash veined a rapidly blackening west.

"It's going to rain buckets," said the man called Eddie. "If you live around here, can you let us come into your house till it's over, gir—er—miss?"

## EX MACHINA

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"Yes."

"I'm Mr. Brandes—Ed Brandes of New York——" speaking through cigar-clutching teeth. "This is Mr. Ben Stull, of the same. . . . It's raining already. Is that your house?"

"I live *there*," said Rue, nodding across the bridge. "You may go in."

She walked ahead, dragging the fish; Stull went to the car, took two suitcases from the boot; Brandes threw both overcoats over his arm, and followed in the wake of Ruhannah and her fish.

"No Saratoga and no races today, Eddie," remarked Stull. But Brandes' narrow, grey-green eyes were following Ruhannah.

"It's a pity," continued Stull, "somebody didn't learn you to drive a car before you ask your friends joy-riding."

"Aw—shut up," returned Brandes slowly, between his teeth.

They climbed the flight of steps to the verandah, through a rapidly thickening gloom which was ripped wide open at intervals by lightning.

So Brandes and his shadow, Bennie Stull, came into the home of Ruhannah Carew.

Her mother, who had observed their approach from the window, opened the door.

"Mother," said Ruhannah, "here is the fish I caught—and two gentlemen."

With which dubious but innocent explanation she continued on toward the kitchen, carrying her fish.

Stull offered a brief explanation to account for their plight and presence; Brandes, listening and watching the mother out of greenish, sleepy eyes, made up his mind concerning her.

## THE DARK STAR

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While the spare room was being prepared by mother and daughter, he and Stull, seated in the sitting-room, their hats upon their knees, exchanged solemn common-places with the Reverend Mr. Carew.

Brandes, always the gambler, always wary and reticent by nature, did all the listening before he came to conclusions that relaxed the stiffness of his attitude and the immobility of his large, round face.

Then, at ease under circumstances and conditions which he began to comprehend and have an amiable contempt for, he became urbane and conversational, and a little amused to find navigation so simple, even when out of his proper element.

From the book on the invalid's knees, Brandes took his cue; and the conversation developed into a monologue on the present condition of foreign missions—skilfully inspired by the respectful attention and the brief and ingenious questions of Brandes.

"Doubtless," concluded the Reverend Mr. Carew, "you are familiar with the life of the Reverend Adoniram Judson, Mr. Brandes."

It turned out to be Brandes' favourite book.

"You will recollect, then, the amazing conditions in India which confronted Dr. Judson and his wife."

Brandes recollected perfectly—with a slow glance at Stull.

"All that is changed," said the invalid. "—God be thanked. And conditions in Armenia are changing for the better, I hope."

"Let us hope so," returned Brandes solemnly.

"To doubt it is to doubt the goodness of the Almighty," said the Reverend Mr. Carew. His dreamy eyes became fixed on the rain-splashed window, burned a little with sombre inward light.

## EX MACHINA

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"In Trebizond," he began, "in my time——"

His wife came into the room, saying that the spare bedchamber was ready and that the gentlemen might wish to wash before supper, which would be ready in a little while.

On their way upstairs they encountered Ruhannah coming down. Stull passed with a polite grunt; Brandes ranged himself for the girl to pass him.

"Ever so much obliged to you, Miss Carew," he said. "We have put you to a great deal of trouble, I am sure."

Rue looked up surprised, shy, not quite understanding how to reconcile his polite words and pleasant voice with the voice and manner in which he had addressed her on the bridge.

"It is no trouble," she said, flushing slightly. "I hope you will be comfortable."

And she continued to descend the stairs a trifle more hastily, not quite sure she cared very much to talk to that kind of man.

In the spare bedroom, whither Stull and Brandes had been conducted, the latter was seated on the big and rather shaky maple bed, buttoning a fresh shirt and collar, while Stull took his turn at the basin. Rain beat heavily on the windows.

"Say, Ben," remarked Brandes, "you want to be careful when we go downstairs that the old guy don't spot us for sporting men. He's a minister, or something."

Stull lifted his dripping face of a circus clown from the basin.

"What's that?"

## THE DARK STAR

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"I say we don't want to give the old people a shock. You know what they'd think of us."

"What do I care what they think?"

"Can't you be polite?"

"I can be better than that; I can be honest," said Stull, drying his sour visage with a flimsy towel.

After Brandes had tied his polka-dotted tie carefully before the blurred mirror:

"What do you mean by that?" he asked stolidly.

"Ah—I know what I mean, Eddie. So do you. You're a smooth talker, all right. You can listen and look wise, too, when there's anything in it for you. Just see the way you got Stein to put up good money for you! And all you done was to listen to him and keep your mouth shut."

Brandes rose with an air almost jocular and smote Stull upon the back.

"Stein thinks he's the greatest manager on earth. Let him tell you so if you want anything out of him," he said, walking to the window.

The volleys of rain splashing on the panes obscured the outlook; Brandes flattened his nose against the glass and stood as though lost in thought.

Behind him Stull dried his features, rummaged in the suitcase, produced a bathrobe and slippers, put them on, and stretched himself out on the bed.

"Aren't you coming down to buzz the preacher?" demanded Brandes, turning from the drenched window.

"So you can talk phony to the little kid? No."

"Ah, get it out of your head that I mean phony."

"Well, what do you mean?"

"Nothing."

Stull gave him a contemptuous glance and turned over on the pillow.

## *EX MACHINA*

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"Are you coming down?"

"No."

So Brandes took another survey of himself in the glass, used his comb and brushes again, added a studied twist to his tie, shot his cuffs, and walked out of the room with the solid deliberation which characterised his carriage at all times.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE END OF SOLITUDE

A RAIN-WASHED world, smelling sweet as a wet rose, a cloudless sky delicately blue, and a swollen stream tumbling and foaming under the bridge—of these Mr. Eddie Brandes was agreeably conscious as he stepped out on the verandah after breakfast, and, unclasping a large gold cigar case, inserted a cigar between his teeth.

He always had the appearance of having just come out of a Broadway barber shop with the visible traces of shave, shampoo, massage, and manicure patent upon his person.

His short, square figure was clothed in well-cut blue serge; a smart straw hat embellished his head, polished russet shoes his remarkably small feet. On his small fat fingers several heavy rings were conspicuous. And the odour of cologne exhaled from and subtly pervaded the ensemble.

Across the road, hub-deep in wet grass and weeds, he could see his wrecked runabout, glistening with rain-drops.

He stood for a while on the verandah, both hands shoved deep into his pockets, his cigar screwed into his cheek. From time to time he jingled keys and loose coins in his pockets. Finally he sauntered down the steps and across the wet road to inspect the machine at closer view.

Contemplating it tranquilly, head on one side and his left eye closed to avoid the drifting cigar smoke,

## THE END OF SOLITUDE

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he presently became aware of a girl in a pink print dress leaning over the grey parapet of the bridge. And, picking his way among the puddles, he went toward her.

"Good morning, Miss Carew," he said, taking off his straw hat.

She turned her head over her shoulder; the early sun glistened on his shiny, carefully parted hair and lingered in glory on a diamond scarf pin.

"Good morning," she said, a little uncertainly, for the memory of their first meeting on the bridge had not entirely been forgotten.

"You had breakfast early," he said.

"Yes."

He kept his hat off; such little courtesies have their effect; also it was good for his hair which, he feared, had become a trifle thinner recently.

"It is beautiful weather," said Mr. Brandes, squinting at her through his cigar smoke.

"Yes." She looked down into the tumbling water.

"This is a beautiful country, isn't it, Miss Carew?"

"Yes."

With his head a little on one side he inspected her. There was only the fine curve of her cheek visible, and a white neck under the chestnut hair; and one slim, tanned hand resting on the stone parapet.

"Do you like motoring?" he asked.

She looked up:

"Yes. . . . I have only been out a few times."

"I'll have another car up here in a few days. I'd like to take you out."

She was silent.

"Ever go to Saratoga?" he inquired.

"No."

## THE DARK STAR

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"I'll take you to the races—with your mother—  
Would you like to go?"

She remained silent so long that he became a trifle  
uneasy.

"With your mother," he repeated, moving so he could  
see a little more of her face.

"I don't think mother would go," she said.

"Would she let you go?"

"I don't think so."

"There's nothing wrong with racing," he said, "if  
you don't bet money on the horses."

But Rue knew nothing about sport, and her igno-  
rance as well as the suggested combination of Saratoga,  
automobile, and horse racing left her silent again.

Brandes sat down on the parapet of the bridge and  
held his straw hat on his fat knees.

"Then we'll make it a family party," he said, "your  
father and mother and you, shall we? And we'll just  
go off for the day."

"Thank you."

"Would you like it?"

"Yes."

"Will you go?"

"I—work in the mill."

"Every day?"

"Yes."

"How about Sunday?"

"We go to church. . . . I don't know. . . . Per-  
haps we might go in the afternoon."

"I'll ask your father," he said, watching the deli-  
cately flushed face with odd, almost sluggish persist-  
ency.

His grey-green eyes seemed hypnotised; he ap-  
peared unable to turn them elsewhere; and she, grad-

## THE END OF SOLITUDE

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ually becoming conscious of his scrutiny, kept her own eyes averted.

"What were you looking at in the water?" he asked.

"I was looking for our boat. It isn't there. I'm afraid it has gone over the dam."

"I'll help you search for it," he said, "when I come back from the village. I'm going to walk over and find somebody who'll cart that runabout to the railroad station. . . . You're not going that way, are you?" he added, rising.

"No."

"Then——" he lifted his hat high and put it on with care—"until a little later, Miss Carew. . . . And I want to apologise for speaking so familiarly to you yesterday. I'm sorry. It's a way we get into in New York. Broadway isn't good for a man's manners. . . . Will you forgive me, Miss Carew?"

Embarrassment kept her silent; she nodded her head, and finally turned and looked at him. His smile was agreeable.

She smiled faintly, too, and rose.

"Until later, then," he said. "This is the Gayfield road, isn't it?"

"Yes."

She turned and walked toward the house; and as though he could not help himself he walked beside her, his hat in his hand once more.

"I like this place," he said. "I wonder if there is a hotel in Gayfield."

"The Gayfield House."

"Is it *very* bad?" he asked jocosely.

She seemed surprised. It was considered good, she thought.

With a slight, silent nod of dismissal she crossed the

## THE DARK STAR

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road and went into the house, leaving him standing beside his wrecked machine once more, looking after her out of sluggish eyes.

Presently, from the house, emerged Stull, his pasty face startling in its pallor under the cloudless sky, and walked slowly over to Brandes.

"Well, Ben," said the latter pleasantly, "I'm going to Gayfield to telegraph for another car."

"How soon can they get one up?" inquired Stull, inserting a large cigar into his slitted mouth and lighting it.

"Oh, in a couple of days, I guess. I don't know. I don't care much, either."

"We can go on to Saratoga by train," suggested Stull complacently.

"We can stay here, too."

"What for?"

Brandes said in his tight-lipped, even voice:

"The fishing's good. I guess I'll try it." He continued to contemplate the machine, but Stull's black eyes were turned on him intently.

"How about the races?" he asked. "Do we go or not?"

"Certainly."

"When?"

"When they send us a car to go in."

"Isn't the train good enough?"

"The fishing here is better."

Stull's pasty visage turned sourer:

"Do you mean we lose a couple of days in this God-forsaken dump because you'd rather go to Saratoga in a runabout than in a train?"

"I tell you I'm going to stick around for a while."

"For how long?"

## THE END OF SOLITUDE

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"Oh, I don't know. When we get our car we can talk it over and——"

"Ah," ejaculated Stull in disgust, "what the hell's the matter with you? Is it that little skirt you was buzzing out here like you never seen one before?"

"How did you guess, Ben?" returned Brandes with the almost expressionless jocularly that characterised him at times.

"*That* little red-headed, spindling, freckled, milk-fed mill-hand——"

"Funny, ain't it? But there's no telling what will catch the tired business man, is there, Ben?"

"Well, what does catch him?" demanded Stull angrily. "What's the answer?"

"I guess she's the answer, Ben."

"Ah, leave the kid alone——"

"I'm going to have the car sent up here. I'm going to take her out. Go on to Saratoga if you want to. I'll meet you there——"

"When?"

"When I'm ready," replied Brandes evenly. But he smiled.

Stull looked at him, and his white face, soured by dyspepsia, became sullen with wrath. At such times, too, his grammar suffered from indigestion.

"Say, Eddie," he began, "can't no one learn you nothin' at all? How many times would you have been better off if you'd listened to me? Every time you throw me you hand yourself one. Now that you got a little money again and a little backing, don't do anything like *that*——"

"Like what?"

"Like chasin' dames! Don't act foolish like you done in Chicago last summer! You wouldn't listen to me

## THE DARK STAR

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then, would you? And that Denver business, too! Say, look at all the foolish things you done against all I could say to save you—like backing that cowboy plug against Battling Jensen!—Like taking that big hunk o' beef, Walstein, to San Antonio, where Kid O'Rourke put him out in the first! And everybody's laughing at you yet! Ah——" he exclaimed angrily, "somebody tell me why I don't quit you, you big dill pickle! I wish someone would tell me why I stand for you, because I don't know. . . . And look what you're doing now; you got some money of your own and plenty of syndicate money to put on the races and a big comish! You got a good theayter in town with Morris Stein to back you and everything—and look what you're doing!" he ended bitterly.

Brandes tightened his dental grip on his cigar and squinted at him good-humouredly.

"Say, Ben," he said, "would you believe it if I told you I'm stuck on her?"

"Ah, you'd fall for anything. I never seen a skirt you wouldn't chase."

"I don't mean that kind."

"What kind, then?"

"This is on the level, Ben."

"What! Ah, go on! *You* on the level?"

"All the same, I am."

"You can't be on the level! You don't know how."

"Why?"

"You got a wife, and you know damn well you have."

"Yes, and she's getting her divorce."

Stull regarded him with habitual and sullen distrust.

"She hasn't got it yet."

"She'll get it. Don't worry."

"I thought you was for fighting it."

## *THE END OF SOLITUDE*

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"I was going to fight it; but——" His slow, narrow, greenish eyes stole toward the house across the road.

"Just like that," he said, after a slight pause; "that's the way the little girl hit me. I'm on the level, Ben. The first skirt I ever saw that I wanted to find waiting in the inner for me when I come home. Get me?"

"I don't know whether I do or not."

"Get this, then; she isn't all over paint; she's got no make-up, thank God, and she smells sweet as a daisy in the field. Ah, what the hell——" he burst out between his clenched teeth "—when every woman in New York smells like a chorus girl! Don't I get it all day? The whole city stinks like a star's dressing room. And I married her! And I'm through. I want to get my breath and I'm getting it."

Stull's white features betrayed merely the morbid suffering of indigestion; he said nothing and sucked at his cigar.

"I'm through," repeated Brandes. "I want a home and a wife—the kind that even a fly cop won't pinch on sight—the kind of little thing that's over there in that old shack. Whatever I am, I don't want a wife like me—nor kids, either."

Stull remained sullenly unresponsive.

"Call her a hick if you like. All right, I want that kind."

No comment from Stull, who was looking at the wrecked car.

"Understand, Ben?"

"I tell you I don't know whether I do or not!"

"Well, what don't you understand?"

"Nothin'. . . Well, then, your falling for a kid like that, first crack out o' the box. I'm honest; I can't understand it."



## THE DARK STAR

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"She hit me that way—so help me God!"

"And you're on the level?"

"Absolutely, Ben."

"What about the old guy and the mother? Take 'em to live with you?"

"If she wants 'em."

Stull stared at him in uneasy astonishment:

"All right, Eddie. Only don't act foolish till Minna passes you up. And get out of here or you will. If you're on the level, as you say you are, you've got to mark time for a good long while yet——"

"Why?"

"You don't have to ask me that, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Why? I want to marry her, I tell you. I mean to. I'm taking no chances that some hick will do it while I'm away. I'm going to stay right here."

"And when the new car comes?"

"I'll keep her humming between here and Saratoga."

"And then what?"

Brandes' greenish eyes rested on the car and he smoked in silence for a while. Then:

"Listen, Ben. I'm a busy man. I got to be back in town and I got to have a wedding trip too. You know me, Ben. You know what I mean. That's me. When I do a thing I do it. Maybe I make plenty of mistakes. Hell! I'd rather make 'em than sit pat and do nothing!"

"You're crazy."

"Don't bet on it, Ben. I know what I want. I'm going to make money. Things are going big with me——"

"You tinhorn! You always say that!"

"Watch me. I bet you I make a killing at Saratoga!"

## THE END OF SOLITUDE

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[ bet you I make good with Morris Stein! I bet you the first show I put on goes big! I bet——”

“Ah, can it!”

“Wait! I bet you I marry that little girl in two weeks and she stands for it when I tell her later we’d better get married again!”

“Say! Talk sense!”

“I am.”

“What’ll they do to you if your wife makes a holler?”

“Who ever heard of her or me in the East?”

“You want to take a chance like that?”

“I’ll fix it. I haven’t got time to wait for Minna to shake me loose. Besides, she’s in Seattle. I’ll fix it so she doesn’t hear until she gets her freedom. I’ll get a license right here. I guess I’ll use your name——”

“What!” yelled Stull.

“Shut your face!” retorted Brandes. “What do you think you’re going to do, squeal?”

“You think I’m going to stand for that?”

“Well, then, I won’t use your name. I’ll use my own. Why not? I mean honest. It’s dead level. I’ll re-marry her. I want her, I tell you. I want a wedding trip, too, before I go back——”

“With the first rehearsal called for September fifteenth! What’s the matter with you? Do you think Stein is going to stand for——”

“You’ll be on hand,” said Brandes pleasantly. “I’m going to Paris for four weeks—two weeks there, two on the ocean——”

“You——”

“Save your voice, Ben. That’s settled.”

Stull turned upon him a dead white visage distorted with fury:

“I hope she throws you out!” he said breathlessly.

## THE DARK STAR

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"You talk about being on the level! Every level's crooked with you. You don't know what square means; a square has got more than four corners for you! Go on! Stick around. I don't give a damn what you do. Go on and do it. But I quit right here."

Both knew that the threat was empty. As a shadow clings to a man's heels, as a lost soul haunts its slayer, as damnation stalks the damned, so had Stull followed Brandes; and would follow to the end. Why? Neither knew. It seemed to be their destiny, surviving everything—their bitter quarrels, the injustice and tyranny of Brandes, his contempt and ridicule sometimes—enduring through adversity, even penury, through good and bad days, through abundance and through want, through shame and disgrace, through trickery, treachery, and triumph—nothing had ever broken the occult bond which linked these two. And neither understood why, but both seemed to be vaguely conscious that neither was entirely complete without the other.

"Ben," said Brandes affably, "I'm going to walk over to Gayfield. Want to come?"

They went off, together.

## CHAPTER VII

### OBSESSION

By the end of the week Brandes had done much to efface any unpleasant impression he had made on Ruthannah Carew.

The girl had never before had to do with any mature man. She was therefore at a disadvantage in every way, and her total lack of experience emphasised the odds.

Nobody had ever before pointedly preferred her, paid her undivided attention; no man had ever sought her, conversed with her, deferred to her, interested himself in her. It was entirely new to her, this attention which Brandes paid her. Nor could she make any comparisons between this man and other men, because she knew no other men. He was an entirely novel experience to her; he had made himself interesting, had proved amusing, considerate, kind, generous, and apparently interested in what interested her. And if his unfeigned preference for her society disturbed and perplexed her, his assiduous civilities toward her father and mother were gradually winning from her far more than anything he had done for her.

His white-faced, odd little friend had gone; he himself had taken quarters at the Gayfield House, where a car like the wrecked one was stabled for his use.

He had already taken her father and mother and herself everywhere within motoring distance; he had accompanied them to church; he escorted her to the

movies; he walked with her in the August evenings after supper, rowed her about on the pond, fished from the bridge, told her strange stories in the moonlight on the verandah, her father and mother interested and attentive.

For the career of Mr. Eddie Brandes was capable of furnishing material for interesting stories if carefully edited, and related with discretion and circumspection. He had been many things to many men—and to several women—he had been a tinhorn gambler in the Southwest, a miner in Alaska, a saloon keeper in Wyoming, a fight promoter in Arizona. He had travelled profitably on popular ocean liners until requested to desist; Auteuil, Neuilly, Vincennes, and Longchamps knew him as tout, bookie, and, when fitfully prosperous, as a plunger. Epsom knew him once as a welcher; and knew him no more.

He had taken a comic opera company through the wheat-belt—one way; he had led a burlesque troupe into Arizona and had traded it there for a hotel.

“When Eddie *wants* to talk,” Stull used to say, “that smoke, *Othello*, hasn’t got nothing on him.”

However, Brandes seldom chose to talk. This was one of his rare garrulous occasions; and, with careful self-censorship, he was making an endless series of wonder-tales out of the episodes and *faits divers* common to the experience of such as he.

So, of moving accidents by flood and field this man had a store, and he contrived to make them artistically innocuous and perfectly fit for family consumption.

Further, two of his friends motored over from Saratoga to see him, were brought to supper at the Carew’s; and they gave him a clean bill of moral health. They were, respectively, “Doc” Curfoot—suave hunter of

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Peacock Alley and gentleman "capper"—whom Brandes introduced as the celebrated specialist, Doctor Elbert Curfoot—and Captain Harman Quint, partner in "Quint's" celebrated temple of chance—introduced as the distinguished navigating officer which he appeared to be. The steering for their common craft, however, was the duty of the eminent Doc.

They spent the evening on the verandah with the family; and it was quite wonderful what a fine fellow each turned out to be—information confidentially imparted to the Reverend Mr. Carew by each of the three distinguished gentlemen in turn.

Doc Curfoot, whose business included the ability to talk convincingly on any topic, took the Reverend Mr. Carew's measure and chose literature; and his suave critique presently became an interesting monologue listened to in silence by those around him.

Brandes had said, "Put me in right, Doc," and Doc was accomplishing it, partly to oblige Brandes, partly for practice. His agreeable voice so nicely pitched, so delightfully persuasive, recapitulating all the common-places and cant phrases concerning the literature of the day, penetrated gratefully the intellectual isolation of these humble gentlepeople, and won very easily their innocent esteem. With the Reverend Mr. Carew Doc discussed such topics as the influence on fiction of the ethical ideal. With Mrs. Carew Captain Quint exchanged reminiscences of travel on distant seas. Brandes attempted to maintain low-voiced conversation with Rue, who responded in diffident monosyllables to his advances.

Brandes walked down to their car with them after they had taken their leave.

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"What's the idea, Eddie?" inquired Doc Curfoot, pausing before the smart little speeder.

"It's straight."

"Oh," said Doc, softly, betraying no surprise—about the only thing he never betrayed. "Anything in it for you, Eddie?"

"Yes. A good girl. The kind you read about. Isn't that enough?"

"Minna chucked you?" inquired Captain Quint.

"She'll get her decree in two or three months. Then I'll have a home. And everything that you and I are keeps out of that home, Cap. See?"

"Certainly," said Quint. "Quite right, Eddie."

Doc Curfoot climbed in and took the wheel; Quint followed him.

"Say," he said in his pleasant, guarded voice, "watch out that Minna don't double-cross you, Eddie."

"How?"

"—Or shoot you up. She's some *schutzen-fest*, you know, when she turns loose——"

"Ah, I tell you she *wants* the divorce. Abe Grittlefeld's crazy about her. He'll get Abe Gordon to star her on Broadway; and that's enough for her. Besides, she'll marry Maxy Venem when she can afford to keep him."

"You never understood Minna Minti."

"Well, who ever understood any German?" demanded Brandes. "She's one of those sour-blooded, silent Dutch women that make me ache."

Doc pushed the self-starter; there came a click, a low humming. Brandes' face cleared and he held out his square-shaped hand:

"You fellows," he said, "have put me right with the old folks here. I'll do the same for you some day."

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Don't talk about this little girl and me, that's all."

"All the same," repeated Doc, "don't take any chances with Minna. She's on to you, and she's got a rotten Dutch disposition."

"That's right, Doc. And say, Harman,"—to Quint—"tell Ben he's doing fine. Tell him to send me what's mine, because I'll want it very soon now. I'm going to take a month off and then I'm going to show Stein how a theatre can be run."

"Eddie," said Quint, "it's a good thing to think big, but it's a damn poor thing to talk big. Cut out the talk and you'll be a big man some day."

The graceful car moved forward into the moonlight; his two friends waved an airy adieu; and Brandes went slowly back to the dark verandah where sat a young girl, pitifully immature in mind and body—and two old people little less innocent for all their experience in the ranks of Christ, for all the wounds that scarred them both in the over-sea service which had broken them forever.

"A very handsome and distinguished gentleman, your friend Dr. Curfoot," said the Reverend Mr. Carew. "I imagine his practice in New York is not only fashionable but extensive."

"Both," said Brandes.

"I assume so. He seems to be intimately acquainted with people whose names for generations have figured prominently in the social columns of the New York press."

"Oh, yes, Curfoot and Quint know them all."

Which was true enough. They had to. One must know people from whom one accepts promissory notes to liquidate those little affairs peculiar to the temple



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of chance. And New York's best furnished the neophytes for these rites.

"I thought Captain Quint very interesting," ventured Ruhannah. "He seems to have sailed over the entire globe."

"Naval men are always delightful," said her mother. And, laying her hand on her husband's arm in the dark: "Do you remember, Wilbour, how kind the officers from the cruiser *Oneida* were when the rescue party took us aboard?"

"God sent the *Oneida* to us," said her husband dreamily. "I thought it was the end of the world for us—for you and me and baby Rue—that dreadful flight from the mission to the sea."

His bony fingers tightened over his wife's toilworn hand. In the long grass along the creek fireflies sparkled, and their elfin lanterns, waning, glowing, drifted high in the calm August night.

The Reverend Mr. Carew gathered his crutches; the night was a trifle damp for him; besides, he desired to read. Brandes, as always, rose to aid him. His wife followed.

"Don't stay out long, Rue," she said in the doorway.

"No, mother."

Brandes came back. Departing from his custom, he did not light a cigar, but sat in silence, his narrow eyes trying to see Ruhannah in the darkness. But she was only a delicate shadow shape to him, scarcely detached from the darkness that enveloped her.

He meant to speak to her then. And suddenly found he could not, realised, all at once, that he lacked the courage.

This was the more amazing and disturbing to him

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because he could not remember the time or occasion when the knack of fluent speech had ever failed him.

He had never foreseen such a situation; it had never occurred to him that he would find the slightest difficulty in saying easily and gracefully what he had determined to say to this young girl.

Now he sat there silent, disturbed, nervous, and tongue-tied. At first he did not quite comprehend what was making him afraid. After a long while he understood that it was some sort of fear of her—fear of her refusal, fear of losing her, fear that she might have—in some occult way—divined what he really was, that she might have heard things concerning him, his wife, his career. The idea turned him cold.

And all at once he realised how terribly in earnest he had become; how deeply involved; how vital this young girl had become to him.

Never before had he really wanted anything as compared to this desire of his for her. He was understanding, too, in a confused way, that such a girl and such a home for him as she could make was going not only to give him the happiness he expected, but that it also meant betterment for himself—straighter living, perhaps straighter thinking—the birth of something resembling self-respect, perhaps even aspiration—or at least the aspiration toward that respect from others which honest living dare demand.

He wanted her; he wanted her now; he wanted to marry her whether or not he had the legal right; he wanted to go away for a month with her, and then return and work for her, for them both—build up a fortune and a good reputation with Stein's backing and Stein's theatre—stand well with honest men, stand well

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with himself, stand always, with her, for everything a man should be.

If she loved him she would forgive him and quietly remarry him as soon as Minna kicked him loose. He was confident he could make her happy, make her love him if once he could find courage to speak—if once he could win her. And suddenly the only possible way to go about it occurred to him.

His voice was a trifle husky and unsteady from the nervous tension when he at last broke the silence:

"Miss Rue," he said, "I have a word to say to your father and mother. Would you wait here until I come back?"

"I think I had better go in, too——"

"Please don't."

"Why?" She stopped short, instinctively, but not surmising.

"You will wait, then?" he asked.

"I was going in. . . . But I'll sit here a little while." He rose and went in, rather blindly.

Ruhannah, dreaming there deep in her splint arm-chair, slim feet crossed, watched the fireflies sailing over the alders. Sometimes she thought of Brandes, pleasantly, sometimes of other matters. Once the memory of her drive home through the wintry moonlight with young Neeland occurred to her, and the reminiscence was vaguely agreeable.

Listless, a trifle sleepy, dreamily watching the fireflies, the ceaseless noise of the creek in her ears, inconsequential thoughts flitted through her brain—the vague, aimless, guiltless thoughts of a young and unstained mind.

She was nearly asleep when Brandes came back, and

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she looked up at him where he stood beside her porch chair in the darkness.

“Miss Rue,” he said, “I have told your father and mother that I am in love with you and want to make you my wife.”

The girl lay there speechless, astounded.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A CHANGE IMPENDS

THE racing season at Saratoga drew toward its close— and Brandes had appeared there only twice in person— both times with a very young girl.

“If you got to bring her here to the races, can’t you get her some clothes?” whispered Stull in his ear. “That get-up of hers is something fierce.”

Late hours, hot weather, indiscreet nourishment, and the feverish anxiety incident to betting other people’s money had told on Stull. His eyes were like two smears of charcoal on his pasty face; sourly he went about the business which Brandes should have attended to, nursing resentment—although he was doing better than Brandes had hoped to do.

Their joint commission from his winnings began to assume considerable proportions; at track and club and hotel people were beginning to turn and stare when the little man with the face of a sick circus clown appeared, always alone, greeting with pallid indifference his acquaintances, ignoring overtures, noticing neither sport, nor fashion, nor political importance, nor yet the fair and frail whose curiosity and envy he was gradually arousing.

Obsequiousness from club, hotel, and racing officials made no impression on him; he went about his business alone, sullen, preoccupied, deathly pale, asking no information, requesting no favours, conferring with nobody, doing no whispering and enduring none.

## *A CHANGE IMPENDS*

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After a little study of that white, sardonic, impossible face, people who would have been glad to make use of him became discouraged. And those who first had recognised him in Saratoga found, at the end of the racing month, nothing to add to their general identification of him as "Ben Stull, partner of Eddie Brandes—Western sports."

Stull, whispering in Brandes' ear again, where he sat beside him in the grand stand, added to his earlier comment on Ruhannah's appearance:

"Why don't you fix her up, Eddie? It looks like you been robbing a country school."

Brandes' slow, greenish eyes marked sleepily the distant dust, where Mr. Sanford's Nick Stoner was leading a brilliant field, steadily overhauling the favourite, Deborah Glenn.

"When the time comes for me to fix her up," he said between thin lips which scarcely moved, "she'll look like Washington Square in May—not like Fifth Avenue and Broadway."

Nick Stoner continued to lead. Stull's eyes resembled two holes burnt in a sheet; Brandes yawned. They were plunging the limit on the Sanford favourite.

As for Ruhannah, she sat with slender gloved hands tightly clasped, lips parted, intent, fascinated with the sunlit beauty of the scene.

Brandes looked at her, and his heavy, expressionless features altered subtly:

"Some running!" he said.

A breathless nod was her response. All around them repressed excitement was breaking out; men stood up and shouted; women rose, and the club house seemed

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suddenly to blossom like a magic garden of wind-tossed flowers.

Through the increasing cheering Stull looked on without a sign of emotion, although affluence or ruin, in the Sanford colours, sat astride the golden roan.

Suddenly Ruhannah stood up, one hand pressed to the ill-fitting blue serge over her wildly beating heart. Brandes rose beside her. Not a muscle in his features moved.

“Gawd!” whispered Stull in his ear, as they were leaving.

“Some killing, Ben!” nodded Brandes in his low, deliberate voice. His heavy, round face was deeply flushed; Fortune, the noisy wanton, had flung both arms around his neck. But his slow eyes were continually turned on the slim young girl whom he was teaching to walk beside him without taking his arm.

“Ain’t she on to us?” Stull had enquired. And Brandes’ reply was correct; Ruhannah never dreamed that it made a penny’s difference to Brandes whether Nick Stoner won or whether it was Deborah Glenn which the wild-voiced throng saluted.

They did not remain in Saratoga for dinner. They took Stull back to his hotel on the rumble of the run-about, Brandes remarking that he thought he should need a chauffeur before long and suggesting that Stull look about Saratoga for a likely one.

Halted in the crush before the United States Hotel, Stull decided to descend there. Several men in the passing crowds bowed to Brandes; one, Norton Smawley, known to the fraternity as “Parson” Smawley, came out to the curb to shake hands. Brandes intro-

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duced him to Rue as "Parson" Smawley—whether with some sinister future purpose already beginning to take shape in his round, heavy head, or whether a perverted sense of humour prompted him to give Rue the idea that she had been in godly company, it is difficult to determine.

He added that Miss Carew was the daughter of a clergyman and a missionary. And the Parson took his cue. At any rate Rue, leaning from her seat, listened to the persuasive and finely modulated voice of Parson Smawley with pleasure, and found his sleek, graceful presence and courtly manners most agreeable. There were no such persons in Gayfield.

She hoped, shyly, that if he were in Gayfield he would call on her father. Once in a very long while clergymen called on her father, and their rare visits remained a pleasure to the lonely invalid for months.

The Parson promised to call, very gravely. It would not have embarrassed him to do so; it was his business in life to have a sufficient knowledge of every man's business to enable him to converse convincingly with anybody.

He took polished leave of her; took leave of Brandes with the faintest flutter of one eyelid, as though he understood Brandes' game. Which he did not; nor did Brandes himself, entirely.

They had thirty miles to go in the runabout. So they would not remain to dinner. Besides, Brandes did not care to make himself conspicuous in public just then. Too many people knew more or less about him—the sort of people who might possibly be in communication with his wife. There was no use slapping chance in the face. Two quiet visits to the races with Ruhan-



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nah was enough for the present. Even those two visits were scarcely discreet. It was time to go.

Stull and Brandes stood consulting together beside the runabout; Rue sat in the machine watching the press of carriages and automobiles on Broadway, and the thronged sidewalks along which brilliant, animated crowds were pouring.

"I'm not coming again, Ben," said Brandes, dropping his voice. "No use to hunt the limelight just now. You can't tell what some of these people might do. I'll take no chances that some fresh guy might try to start something."

"Stir up Minna?" Stull's lips merely formed the question, and his eyes watched Ruhannah.

"They couldn't. What would she care? All the same, I play safe, Ben. Well, be good. Better send me mine on pay day. I'll need it."

Stull's face grew sourer:

"Can't you wait till she gets her decree?"

"And lose a month off? No."

"It's all coming your way, Eddie. Stay wise and play safe. Don't start anything now——"

"It's safe. If I don't take September off I wait a year for my—honeymoon. And I won't. See?"

They both looked cautiously at Ruhannah, who sat motionless, absorbed in the turmoil of vehicles and people.

Brandes' face slowly reddened; he dropped one hand on Stull's shoulder and said, between thin lips that scarcely moved:

"She's all I'm interested in. You don't think much of her, Ben. She isn't painted. She isn't dolled up the way you like 'em. But there isn't anything else that matters very much to me. All I want in the world is

## *A CHANGE IMPENDS*

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sitting in that runabout, looking out of her kid eyes at a thousand or two people who ain't worth the pair of run-down shoes she's wearing."

But Stull's expression remained sardonic and unconvinced.

So Brandes got into his car and took the wheel; and Stull watched them threading a tortuous path through the traffic tangle of Broadway.

They sped past the great hotels, along crowded sidewalks, along the park, and out into an endless stretch of highway where hundreds of other cars were travelling in the same direction.

"Did you have a good time?" he inquired, shifting his cigar and keeping his narrow eyes on the road.

"Yes; it was beautiful—exciting."

"Some horse, Nick Stoner! Some race, eh?"

"I was so excited—with everybody standing up and shouting. And such beautiful horses—and such pretty women in their wonderful dresses! I—I never knew there were such things."

He swung the car, sent it rushing past a lumbering limousine, slowed a little, gripped his cigar between his teeth, and watched the road, both hands on the wheel.

Yes, things were coming his way—coming faster and faster all the while. He had waited many years for this—for material fortune—for that chance which every gambler waits to seize when the psychological second ticks out. But he never had expected that the chance was to include a very young girl in a country-made dress and hat.

As they sped westward the freshening wind from distant pine woods whipped their cheeks; north, blue hills and bluer mountains beyond took fairy shape against the sky; and over all spread the tremendous hea'

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where fleets of white clouds sailed the uncharted wastes, and other fleets glimmered beyond the edges of the world, hull down, on vast horizons.

"I want to make you happy," said Brandes in his low, even voice. It was, perhaps, the most honest statement he had ever uttered.

Ruhannah remained silent, her eyes riveted on the far horizon.

It was a week later, one hot evening, that he telegraphed to Stull in Saratoga:

"Find me a chauffeur who will be willing to go abroad. I'll give you twenty-four hours to get him here."

The next morning he called up Stull on the telephone from the drug store in Gayfield:

"Get my wire, Ben?"

"Yes. But I——"

"Wait. Here's a postscript. I also want Parson Smawley. I want him to get a car and come over to the Gayfield House. Tell him I count on him. And he's to wear black and a white tie."

"Yes. But about that chauffeur you want——"

"Don't argue. Have him here. Have the Parson, also. Tell him to bring a white tie. Understand?"

"Oh, yes, I understand you, Eddie! You don't want anything of me, do you! Go out and get that combination? Just like that! What'll I do? Step into the street and whistle?"

"It's up to you. Get busy."

"As usual," retorted Stull in an acrid voice. "All the same, I'm telling you there ain't a chauffeur you'd have in Saratoga. Who handed you that dope?"

"Try. I need the chauffeur part of the combine, any-

## *A CHANGE IMPENDS*

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way. If he won't go abroad, I'll leave him in town. Get a wiggle on, Ben. How's things?"

"All right. We had War-axe and Lady Johnson. Some killing, eh? That stable is winning all along. We've got Adriutha and Queen Esther today. The Ocean Belle skate is scratched. Doc and Cap and me is thick with the Legislature outfit. We'll trim 'em to-night. How are you feeling, Eddie?"

"Never better. I'll call you up in the morning. Ding-dong!"

"Wait! Are you really going abroad?" shouted Stull.

But Brandes had already hung up.

He walked leisurely back to Brookhollow through the sunshine. He had never been as happy in all his life.

## CHAPTER IX

### NONRESISTANCE

"Long distance calling you, Mr. Stull. One moment, please. . . . Here's your party," concluded the operator.

Stull, huddled sleepily on his bed, picked up the transmitter from the table beside him with a frightful yawn.

"Who is it?" he inquired sourly.

"It's me—Ben!"

"Say, Eddie, have a heart, will you! I need the sleep——"

Brandes' voice was almost jovial:

"Wake up, you poor tout! It's nearly noon——"

"Well, wasn't I singing hymns with Doc and Cap till breakfast time? And believe *me*, we trimmed the Senator's bunch! They've got their transportation back to Albany, and that's about all——"

"Careful what you say. I'm talking from the Gayfield House. The Parson got here all right. He's just left. He'll tell you about things. Listen, Ben, the chauffeur you sent me from Saratoga got here last evening, too. I went out with him and he drives all right. Did you look him up?"

"Now, how could I look him up when you gave me only a day to get him for you?"

"Did he have references?"

"Sure, a wad of them. But I couldn't verify them."

"Who is he?"

"I forget his name. You ought to know it by now."

## NONRESISTANCE

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"How did you get him?"

"Left word at the desk. An hour later he came to my room with a couple of bums. I told him about the job. I told him you wanted a chauffeur willing to go abroad. He said he was all that and then some. So I sent him on. Anything you don't fancy about him?"

"Nothing, I guess. He seems all right. Only I like to know about a man——"

"How can I find out if you don't give me time?"

"All right, Ben. I guess he'll do. By the way, I'm starting for town in ten minutes."

"What's the idea?"

"Ask the Parson. Have you any other news except that you killed that Albany bunch of grafters?"

"No. . . . *Yes!* But it ain't good news. I was going to call you soon as I waked up——"

"What's the trouble?"

"There ain't any trouble—*yet*. But a certain party has showed up here—a very smooth young man whose business is hunting trouble. Get me?"

After a silence Stull repeated:

"Get me, Eddie?"

"No."

"Listen. A certain slippery party——"

"Who, damn it? Talk out. I'm in a hurry."

"Very well, then. Maxy Venem is here!"

The name of his wife's disbarred attorney sent a chill over Brandes.

"What's he doing in Saratoga?" he demanded.

"I'm trying to find out. He was to the races yesterday. He seen Doc. Of course Doc hadn't laid eyes on you for a year. Oh, no, indeed! Heard you was somewhere South, down and out. I don't guess Maxy was

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fooled none. What we done here in Saratoga is growing too big to hush up——”

“What *we’ve* done? Whad’ye mean, *we*? I told you to work by yourself quietly, Ben, and keep me out of it.”

“That’s what I done. Didn’t I circulate the news that you and me had quit partnership? And even then you wouldn’t take my advice. Oh, no. You must show up here at the track with a young lady——”

“How long has Maxy Venem been in Saratoga?” snapped Brandes.

“He told Doc he just come, but Cap found out he’d been here a week. All I hope is he didn’t see you with the Brookhollow party——”

“Do you think he *did*?”

“Listen, Eddie. Max is a smooth guy——”

“Find out what he knows! Do you hear?”

“Who? Me? Me try to make Maxy Venem talk? That snake? If he isn’t on to you now, that would be enough to put him wise. Act like you had sense, Eddie. Call that *other matter* off and slide for town——”

“I can’t, Ben.”

“You got to!”

“I *can’t*, I tell you.”

“You’re nutty in the head! Don’t you suppose that Max is wise to what I’ve been doing here? And don’t you suppose he knows damn well that you’re back of whatever I do? If you ain’t crazy you’ll call that party off for a while.”

Brandes’ even voice over the telephone sounded a trifle unnatural, almost hoarse:

“I can’t call it off. *It’s done.*”

“What’s done?”

“What I told you I was going to do.”

## NONRESISTANCE

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"That!"

"The Parson married us."

"Oh!"

"Wait! Parson Smawley married us, in church, assisted by the local dominie. I didn't count on the dominie. It was her father's idea. He butted in."

"Then is it—is it——?"

"That's what I'm not sure about. You see, the Parson did it, but the dominie stuck around. Whether he got a half nelson on me I don't know till I ask. Anyway, I expected to clinch things—later—so it doesn't really matter, unless Max Venem means bad. Does he, do you think?"

"He *always* does, Eddie."

"Yes, I know. Well, then, I'll wait for a cable from you. And if I've got to take three months off in Paris, why I've got to—that's all."

"Good God! What about Stein? What about the theaytre?"

"*You'll* handle it for the first three months. . . . Say, I've got to go, now. I think she's waiting——"

"Who?"

"My—wife."

"Oh!"

"Yes. The chauffeur took her back to the house in the car to put something in her suitcase that she forgot. I'm waiting for her here at the Gayfield House. We're on our way to town. Going to motor in. Our trunks have gone by rail."

After a silence, Stull's voice sounded again, tense, constrained:

"You better go aboard tonight."

"That's right, too."

"What's your ship?"



## THE DARK STAR

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*"Lusitania."*

"What'll I tell Stein?"

"Tell him I'll be back in a month. You look out for my end. I'll be back in time."

"Will you cable me?"

"Sure. And if you get any later information about Max today, call me at the Knickerbocker. We'll dine there and then go aboard."

"I get you. . . . Say, Eddie, I'm that worried! If this break of yours don't kill our luck——"

"Don't you believe it! I'm going to fight for what I got till someone hands me the count. She's the first thing I ever wanted. I've got her and I guess I can keep her. . . . And listen: there's nothing like her in all God's world!"

"When did you do—it?" demanded Stull, coldly.

"This morning at eleven. I just stepped over here to the garage. I'm talking to you from the bar. She's back by this time and waiting, I guess. So take care of yourself till I see you."

"Same to you, Eddie. And be leery of Max. He's bad. When they disbar a man like that he's twice as dangerous as he was. His ex-partner, Abe Grittlefeld, is a certain party's attorney of record. Ask yourself what you'd be up against if that pair of wolves get started after you! You know what Max would do to you if he could. And Minna, too!"

"Don't worry."

"I *am* worrying! And you ought to. You know what you done to Max. Don't think he ever forgets—He'll do you if he can, same as Minna will."

Brandes' stolid face lost a little of its sanguine colour, where he stood in the telephone box behind the bar of the Gayfield House.

## NONRESISTANCE

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Yes, he knew well enough what he had once done to the disbarred lawyer out in Athabasca when he was handling the Unknown and Venem, the disbarred, was busy looking out for the Athabasca Blacksmith, furnishing the corrupt brains for the firm of Venem and Grittlefeld, and paying steady court to the prettiest girl in Athabasca, Ilse Dumont.

And Brandes' Unknown had almost killed Max Venem's blacksmith; Brandes had taken all Venem's money, and then his girl; more than that, he had "made" this girl, in the theatrical sense of the word; and he had gambled on her beauty and her voice and had won out with both.

Then, while still banking her salary to reimburse himself for his trouble with her, he had tired of her sufficiently to prove unfaithful to his marriage vows at every opportunity. And opportunities were many. Venem had never forgiven him; Ilse Dumont could not understand treachery; and Venem's detectives furnished her with food for thought that presently infuriated her.

And now she was employing Max Venem, once senior partner in the firm of Venem and Grittlefeld, to guide her with his legal advice. She wanted Brandes' ruin, if that could be accomplished; she wanted her freedom anyway.

Until he had met Rue Carew he had taken measures to fight the statutory charges, hoping to involve Venem and escape alimony. Then he met Ruhannah, and became willing to pay for his freedom. And he was still wamped in the vile bog of charges and countercharges, not yet free from it, not yet on solid ground, when the eternal gambler in him suggested to him that he take the chance of marrying this young girl before he was legally free to do so.

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Why on earth did he want to take such a chance? He had only a few months to wait. He had never before really cared for any woman. He loved her—as he understood love—as much as he was capable of loving. If in all the world there was anything sacred to him, it was his sentiment regarding Rue Carew. Yet, he was tempted to take the chance. Even she could not escape his ruling passion; at the last analysis, even she represented to him a gambler's chance. But in Brandes there was another streak. He wanted to take the chance that he could marry her before he had a right to, and get away with it. But his nerve failed. And, at the last moment, he had hedged, engaging Parson Smawley to play the lead instead of an ordained clergyman.

All these things he now thought of as he stood undecided, worried, in the telephone booth behind the bar at the Gayfield House. Twice Stull had spoken, and had been bidden to wait and to hold the wire.

Finally, shaking off the premonition of coming trouble, Brandes called again:

"Ben?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"I'll stay in Paris if there's trouble."

"And throw Stein down?"

"What else is there to do?"

"Well, you can wait, can't you? You don't seem to be able to do that any more, but you better learn."

"All right. What next?"

"Make a quick getaway. Now!"

"Yes, I'm going at once. Keep me posted, Ben. Be good!"

He hung up and went out to the wide, tree-shaded street where Ruhannah sat in the runabout

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waiting him, and the new chauffeur stood by the car.

He took off his straw hat, pulled a cap and goggles from his pocket. His man placed the straw hat in the boot.

“Get what you wanted, Rue?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Been waiting long?”

“I—don’t think so.”

“All right,” he said cheerily, climbing in beside her. “I’m sorry I kept you waiting. Had a business matter to settle. Hungry?”

Rue, very still and colourless, said no, with a mechanical smile. The chauffeur climbed to the rumble.

“I’ll jam her through,” nodded Brandes as the car moved swiftly westward. “We’ll lunch in Albany on time.”

Half a mile, and they passed Neeland’s Mills, where old Dick Neeland stood in his boat out on the pond and cast a glittering lure for pickerel.

She caught a glimpse of him—his sturdy frame, white hair, and ruddy visage—and a swift, almost wistful memory of young Jim Neeland passed through her mind.

But it was a very confused mind—only the bewildered mind of a very young girl—and the memory of the boy washed into its confusion and out again as rapidly as the landscape sped away behind the flying car.

Dully she was aware that she was leaving familiar and beloved things, but could not seem to realise it—childhood, girlhood, father and mother, Brookhollow, the mill, Gayfield, her friends, all were vanishing in the flying dust behind her, dwindling, dissolving into an infinitely growing distance.

They took the gradual slope of a mile-long hill as

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swallows take the air; houses, barns, woods, orchards, grain fields, flew by on either side; other cars approaching passed them like cannon balls; the sunlit, undulating world flowed glittering away behind; only the stainless blue ahead confronted them immovably—a vast, magnificent goal, vague with the mystery of promise.

“On this trip,” said Brandes, “we may only have time to see the Looove and the palaces and all like that. Next year we’ll fix it so we can stay in Paris and you can study art.”

Ruhannah’s lips formed the words, “Thank you.”

“Can’t you learn to call me Eddie?” he urged.

The girl was silent.

“You’re everything in the world to me, Rue.”

The same little mechanical smile fixed itself on her lips, and she looked straight ahead of her.

“Haven’t you begun to love me just a little bit, Rue?”

“I like you. You are very kind to us.”

“Don’t your affection seem to grow a little stronger now?” he urged.

“You are so kind to us,” she repeated gratefully; “I like you for it.”

The utterly unawakened youth of her had always alternately fascinated and troubled him. Gambler that he was, he had once understood that patience is a gambler’s only stock in trade. But now for the first time in his career he found himself without it.

“You said,” he insisted, “that you’d love me when we were married.”

She turned her child’s eyes on him in faint surprise:

“A wife loves her husband always, doesn’t she?”

“Do *you*?”

“I suppose I shall. . . . I haven’t been married *very* long—long enough to feel as though I am really *mar-*”

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ried. When I begin to realise it I shall understand, of course, that I love you."

It was the calm and immature reply of a little girl playing house. He knew it. He looked at her pure, perplexed profile of a child and knew that what he had said was futile—understood that it was meaningless to her, that it was only confusing a mind already dazed—a mind of which too much had been expected, too much demanded.

He leaned over and kissed the cold, almost colourless cheek; her little mechanical smile came back. Then they remembered the chauffeur behind them and Brandes reddened. He was unaccustomed to a man on the rumble.

"Could I talk to mother on the telephone when we get to New York?" she asked presently, still painfully flushed.

"Yes, darling, of course."

"I just want to hear her voice," murmured Rue.

"Certainly. We can send her a wireless, too, when we're at sea."

That interested her. She enquired curiously in regard to wireless telegraphy and other matters concerning ocean steamers.

In Albany her first wave of loneliness came over her in the stuffy dining-room of the big, pretentious hotel, when she found herself seated at a small table alone with this man whom she seemed, somehow or other, to have married.

As she did not appear inclined to eat, Brandes began to search the card for something to tempt her. And, glancing up presently, saw tears glimmering in her eyes.

For a moment he remained dumb as though stunned

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by some sudden and terrible accusation—for a moment only. Then, in an unsteady voice:

“Rue, darling. You must not feel lonely and frightened. I’ll do anything in the world for you. Don’t you know it?”

She nodded.

“I tell you,” he said in that even, concentrated voice of his which scarcely moved his narrow lips, “I’m just crazy about you. You’re my own little wife. You’re all I care about. If I can’t make you happy somebody ought to shoot me.”

She tried to smile; her full lips trembled; a single tear, brimming, fell on the cloth.

“I—don’t mean to be silly. . . . But—Brookhollow seems—ended—forever. . . .”

“It’s only forty miles,” he said with heavy joviality. “Shall we turn around and go back?”

She glanced up at him with an odd expression, as though she hoped he meant it; then her little mechanical smile returned, and she dried her eyes naïvely.

“I don’t know why I cannot seem to get used to being married,” she said. “I never thought that getting married would make me so—so—lonely.”

“Let’s talk about art,” he suggested. “You’re crazy about art and you’re going to Paris. Isn’t that fine?”

“Oh, yes——”

“Sure, it’s fine. That’s where art grows. Artville is Paris’ other name. It’s all there, Rue—the Louvre, the palaces, the Latin Quarter, the statues, the churches, and all like that.”

“What is the Louvre like?” she asked, tremulously, determined to be brave.

As he had seen the Louvre only from the outside, his imaginary description was cautious, general, and brief-

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After a silence, Rue asked whether he thought that their suitcases were quite safe.

"Certainly," he smiled. "I checked them."

"And you're sure they are safe?"

"Of course, darling. What worries you?"

And, as she hesitated, he remembered that she had forgotten to put something into her suitcase and that the chauffeur had driven her back to the house to get it while he himself went into the Gayfield House to telephone Stull.

"What was it you went back for, Rue?" he asked.

"One thing I went back for was my money."

"Money? What money?"

"Money my grandmother left me. I was to have it when I married—six thousand dollars."

"You mean you have it in your suitcase?" he asked, astonished.

"Yes, half of it."

"A cheque?"

"No, in hundreds."

"Bills?"

"Yes. I gave father three thousand. I kept three thousand."

"In bills," he repeated, laughing. "Is your suitcase packed?"

"Yes. I insisted on having my money in cash. So Mr. Wexall, of the Mohawk Bank, sent a messenger with it last evening."

"But," he asked, still immensely amused, "why do you want to travel about with three thousand dollars bills in your suitcase?"

She flushed a little, tried to smile:

"I don't know why. I never before had any money. It is—pleasant to know I have it."



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"But I'll give you all you want, Rue."

"Thank you. . . . I have my own, you see."

"Of course. Put it away in some bank. When you want pin money, ask me."

She shook her head with a troubled smile.

"I couldn't ask anybody for money," she explained.

"Then you don't have to. We'll fix your allowance."

"Thank you, but I have my money, and I don't need it."

This seemed to amuse him tremendously; and Rue laughed a little.

"You are going to take your money to Paris?" he asked.

"Yes."

"To buy things?"

"Oh, no. Just to have it with me."

His rather agreeable laughter sounded again.

"So *that* was what you forgot to put in your suitcase," he said. "No wonder you went back for it."

"There was something else very important, too."

"What, darling?"

"My drawings," she explained innocently.

"Your drawings! Do you mean you've got them too?"

"Yes. I want to take them to Paris and compare them with the pictures I shall see there. It ought to teach me a great deal. Don't you think so?"

"Are you crazy to study?" he asked, touched to quick by her utter ignorance.

"It's all I dream about. If I could work that and support myself and my father and mother—"

"But, Rue! Wake up! We're married, little girl. You don't have to work to support anybody!"

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"I—forgot," said the girl vaguely, her confused grey eyes resting on his laughing, greenish ones.

Still laughing, he summoned the waiter, paid the reckoning; Ruhannah rose as he did; they went slowly out together.

On the sidewalk beside their car stood the new chauffeur, smoking a cigarette which he threw away without haste when he caught sight of them. However, he touched the peak of his cap civilly, with his forefinger.

Brandes, lighting a cigar, let his slow eyes rest on the new man for a moment. Then he helped Rue into the tonneau, got in after her, and thoughtfully took the wheel, conscious that there was something or other about his new chauffeur that he did not find entirely to his liking.

## CHAPTER X

### DRIVING HEAD-ON

IT was mid-afternoon when they began to j through that series of suburbs which the city has fl like a single tentacle northward for a hundred m along the eastern banks of the Hudson.

A smooth road of bluestone with a surface like vel rarely broken by badly paved or badly worn secti ran straight south. Past mansions standing amid : cious lawns all ablaze with late summer and early tumn flowers they sped; past parks, long stretch walls, high fences of wrought iron through which b glimpses of woodlands and splendid gardens cau Rue's eye. And, every now and then, slowing d to traverse some village square and emerging f the further limits, the great river flashed into v sometimes glassy still under high headlands or al towering parapets of mountains, sometimes ru and silvery where it widened into bay or inland with a glimmer of distant villages on the fur shore.

Over the western bank a blinding sun hung in a without a cloud—a sky of undiluted azure; but far south, and as the sun declined, traces of vapours f the huge but still distant city stained the heav Gradually the increasing haze changed from palest . ender and lemon-gold to violet and rose with smouk ing undertones of fire. Beneath it the river caught stains in deeper tones, flowing in sombre washes of fl

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or spreading wide under pastel tints of turquoise set with purple.

Now, as the sun hung lower, the smoke of every river boat, every locomotive speeding along the shores below, lay almost motionless above the water, tinged with the delicate enchantment of declining day.

And into this magic veil Rue was passing already through the calm of a late August afternoon, through tree-embowered villages and towns, the names of which she did not know—swiftly, inexorably passing into the iris-grey obscurity where already the silvery points of arc-lights stretched away into intricate geometrical designs—faint trceries as yet sparkling with subdued lustre under the sunset heavens.

Vast shadowy shapes towered up ahead—outlying public buildings, private institutions, industrial plants, bridges of iron and steel, the ponderous bowed spans of which crossed wildernesses of railroad tracks or craft-crowded waters.

Two enormous arched viaducts of granite stretched away through sparkling semi-obscurity—High Bridge and Washington Bridge. Then it became an increasing confusion of phantom masses against a fading sky—bridges, towers, skyscrapers, viaducts, boulevards, a wilderness of streets outlined by the growing brilliancy of electric lamps.

Brandes, deftly steering through the swarming maze of twilight avenues, turned east across the island, then swung south along the curved parapets and spreading gardens of Riverside Drive.

Perhaps Brandes was tired; he had become uncommunicative, inclined to silence. He did point out to her the squat, truncated mass where the great General slept; called her attention to the river below, where

## **THE DARK STAR**

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three grey battleships lay. A bugle call from the decks came faintly to her ears.

If Rue was tired she did not know it as the car swept her steadily deeper amid the city's wonders.

On her left, beyond the trees, the great dwellings and apartments of the Drive were already glimmering with light in every window; to the right, under the foliage of this endless necklace of parks and circles, a summer-clad throng strolled and idled along the river wall; and past them moved an unbroken column of automobiles, taxicabs, and omnibuses.

At Seventy-second Street they turned to the east across the park, then into Fifth Avenue south once more. She saw the name of the celebrated avenue on the street corner, turned to glance excitedly at Brandes; but his preoccupied face was expressionless, almost forbidding, so she turned again in quest of other delightful discoveries. But there was nothing to identify for her the houses, churches, hotels, shops, on this endless and bewildering avenue of grey stone; as they swung west into Forty-second Street, she caught sight of the great marble mass of the Library, but had no idea what it was.

Into this dusky cañon, aflame with light, they rolled, where street lamps, the lamps of vehicles, and electric signs dazzled her unaccustomed eyes so that she saw nothing except a fiery vista filled with the rush and roar of traffic.

When they stopped, the chauffeur dropped from the rumble and came around to where a tall head porter in blue and silver uniform was opening the tonneau door.

Brandes said to his chauffeur:

"Here are the checks. Our trunks are at the Grand

## DRIVING HEAD-ON

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Central. Get them aboard, then come back here for us at ten o'clock."

The chauffeur lifted his hand to his cap, and looked stealthily between his fingers at Brandes.

"Ten o'clock," he repeated; "very good, sir."

Rue instinctively sought Brandes' arm as they entered the crowded lobby, then remembered, blushed, and withdrew her hand.

Brandes had started toward the desk with the intention of registering and securing a room for the few hours before going aboard the steamer; but something halted him—some instinct of caution. No, he would not register. He sent their luggage to the parcels room, found a maid who took Rue away, then went on through into the bar, where he took a stiff whisky and soda, a thing he seldom did.

In the toilet he washed and had himself brushed. Then, emerging, he took another drink *en passant*, conscious of an odd, dull sense of apprehension for which he could not account.

At the desk they told him there was no telephone message for him. He sauntered over to the news stand, stared at the display of periodicals, but had not sufficient interest to buy even an evening paper.

So he idled about the marble-columned lobby, now crowded with a typical early-autumn throng in quest of dinner and the various nocturnal amusements which the city offers at all times to the frequenters of its thousand temples.

Rue came out of the ladies' dressing room, and he went to her and guided her into the dining-room on the left, where an orchestra was playing. In her blue, provincial travelling gown the slender girl looked oddly out of place amid lace and jewels and the delicate tints

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of frail evening gowns, but her cheeks were bright with colour and her grey eyes brilliant, and the lights touched her thick chestnut hair with a ruddy glory, so that more than one man turned to watch her pass, and the idly contemptuous indifference of more than one woman ended at her neck and chin.

What Rue ate she never afterward remembered. It was all merely a succession of delicious sensations for the palate, for the eye, for the ear when the excellent orchestra was playing some gay overture from one of the newer musical comedies or comic operas.

Brandes at times seemed to shake off a growing depression and rouse himself to talk to her, even jest with her. He smoked cigarettes occasionally during dinner, a thing he seldom did, and, when coffee was served, he lighted one of his large cigars.

Rue, excited under an almost childishly timid manner, leaned on the table with both elbows and linked fingers, listening, watching everything with an almost breathless intelligence which strove to comprehend.

People left; others arrived; the music continued. Several times people passing caught Brandes' eye, and bowed and smiled. He either acknowledged such salutes with a slight and almost surly nod, or ignored them altogether.

One of his short, heavy arms lay carelessly along the back of his chair, where he was sitting sideways looking at the people in the lobby—watching with that same odd sensation of foreboding of which he had been conscious from the first moment he had entered the city line.

What reason for apprehension he had he could not understand. Only an hour lay between him and the

## DRIVING HEAD-ON

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seclusion of the big liner; a few hours and he and this girl beside him would be at sea.

Once he excused himself, went out to the desk, and made an inquiry. But there was no telephone or telegraph message for him; and he came back chewing his cigar.

Finally his uneasiness drew him to his feet again:

"Rue," he said, "I'm going out to telephone to Mr. Stull. It may take some little time. You don't mind waiting, do you?"

"No," she said.

"Don't you want another ice or something?"

She confessed that she did.

So he ordered it and went away.

As she sat leisurely tasting her ice and watching with unflagging interest the people around her, she noticed that the dining-room was already three-quarters empty. People were leaving for café, theatre, or dance; few remained.

Of these few, two young men in evening dress now arose and walked toward the lobby, one ahead of the other. One went out; the other, in the act of going, glanced casually at her as he passed, hesitated, halted, then, half smiling, half inquiringly, came toward her.

"Jim Neeland!" she exclaimed impulsively. "—I mean *Mr.* Neeland——" a riot of colour flooding her face. But her eager hand remained outstretched. He took it, pressed it lightly, ceremoniously, and, still standing, continued to smile down at her.

Amid all this strange, infernal glitter; amid a city of six million strangers, suddenly to encounter a familiar face—to see somebody—anybody—from Gayfield—seemed a miracle too delightful to be true.

"You are Rue Carew," he said. "I was not certain



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for a moment. You know we met only once before."

Rue, conscious of the startled intimacy of her first greeting, blushed with the memory. But Neeland was a tactful young man; he said easily, with his very engaging smile:

"It was nice of you to remember me so frankly and warmly. You have no idea how pleasant it was to hear a Gayfield voice greet me as 'Jim.'"

"I—didn't intend to——"

"Please intend it in future, Rue. You don't mind, do you?"

"No."

"And will you ever forget that magnificent winter night when we drove to Brookhollow after the party?"

"I have—remembered it."

"So have I. . . . Are you waiting for somebody? Of course you are," he added, laughing. "But may I sit down for a moment?"

"Yes, I wish you would."

So he seated himself, lighted a cigarette, glanced up at her and smiled.

"When did you come to New York?" he asked.

"Tonight."

"Well, isn't that a bit of luck to run into you like this! Have you come here to study art?"

"No. . . . Yes, I think, later, I am to study art here."

"At the League?"

"I don't know."

"Better go to the League," he said. "Begin there anyway. Do you know where it is?"

"No," she said.

He called a waiter, borrowed pencil and pad, and wrote down the address of the Art Students' League.

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He had begun to fold the paper when a second thought seemed to strike him, and he added his own address.

"In case I can do anything for you in any way," he explained.

Rue thanked him, opened her reticule, and placed the folded paper there beside her purse.

"I do hope I shall see you soon again," he said, looking gaily, almost mischievously into her grey eyes. "This certainly resembles fate. Don't you think so, Rue—this reunion of ours?"

"Fate?" she repeated.

"Yes. I should even call it romantic. Don't you think our meeting this way resembles something very much like romance?"

She felt herself flushing, tried to smile:

"It couldn't resemble anything," she explained with quaint honesty, "because I am sailing for Europe tomorrow morning; I am going on board in less than an hour. And also—also, I——"

"Also?"—he prompted her, amused, yet oddly touched by her childishly literal reply.

"I am—married."

"Good Lord!" he said.

"This morning," she added, tasting her ice.

"And you're sailing for Europe on your honeymoon!" he exclaimed. "Well, upon my word! And what is your ship?"

"The *Lusitania*."

"Really! I have a friend who is sailing on her—a most charming woman. I sent flowers to her only an hour ago."

"Did you?" asked Rue, interested.

"Yes. She is a widow—the Princess Mistchenka—a delightful and pretty woman. I am going to send a

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note to the steamer tonight saying that—that my very *particular* friend, Ruhannah Carew, is on board, and won't she ask you to tea. You'd love her, Rue. She's a regular woman."

"But—oh, dear!—a Princess!"

"You won't even notice it," he said reassuringly. "She's a corker; she's an artist, too. I couldn't begin to tell you how nice she has been to me. By the way, Rue, whom did you marry?"

"Mr. Brandes."

"Brandes? I don't remember—was he from up-state?"

"No; New York—I think——"

As she bent forward to taste her ice again he noticed for the first time the childlike loveliness of her throat and profile; looked at her with increasing interest, realising that she had grown into a most engaging creature since he had seen her.

Looking up, and beyond him toward the door, she said:

"I think your friend is waiting for you. Had you forgotten him?"

"Oh, that's so!" he exclaimed. Then rising and offering his hand: "I wish you happiness, Rue. You have my address. When you return, won't you let me know where you are? Won't you let me know your husband?"

"Yes."

"Please do. You see you and I have a common bond in art, another in our birthplace. Gayfield folk are your own people and mine. Don't forget me, Rue."

"No, I won't."

So he took his leave gracefully and went away through the enthralling, glittering unreality of it all,

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leaving a young girl thrilled, excited, and deeply impressed with his ease and bearing amid awe-inspiring scenes in which she, too, desired most ardently to find herself at ease.

Also she thought of his friend, the Princess Mitchenka. And again, as before, the name seemed to evoke within her mind a recollection of having heard it before, very long ago.

She wondered whether Neeland would remember to write, and if he did she wondered whether a real princess would actually condescend to invite her to take tea.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BREAKERS

THE east dining-room was almost empty now, though the lobby and the café beyond still swarmed with people arriving and departing. Brandes, chafing at the telephone, had finally succeeded in getting Stull on the wire, only to learn that the news from Saratoga was not agreeable; that they had lost on every horse. Also, Stull had another disquieting item to detail; it seemed that Maxy Venem had been seen that morning in the act of departing for New York on the fast express; and with him was a woman resembling Brandes' wife.

"Who saw her?" demanded Brandes.

"Doc. He didn't get a good square look at her. You know the hats women wear."

"All right. I'm off, Ben. Good-bye."

The haunting uneasiness which had driven him to the telephone persisted when he came out of the booth. He cast a slow, almost sleepy glance around him, saw no familiar face in the thronged lobby, then he looked at his watch.

The car had been ordered for ten; it lacked half an hour of the time; he wished he had ordered the car earlier.

For now his uneasiness was verging on that species of superstitious inquietude which at times obsesses all gamblers, and which is known as a "hunch." He had a hunch that he was "in wrong" somehow or other; an overpowering longing to get on board the steamer

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assailed him—a desire to get out of the city, get away quick.

The risk he had taken was beginning to appear to him as an unwarranted piece of recklessness; he was amazed with himself for taking such a chance—disgusted at his foolish and totally unnecessary course with this young girl. All he had had to do was to wait a few months. He could have married in safety then. And even now he didn't know whether or not the ceremony performed by Parson Smawley had been an illegally legal one; whether it made him a bigamist for the next three months or only something worse. What on earth had possessed him to take such a risk—the terrible hazard of discovery, of losing the only woman he had ever really cared for—the only one he probably could ever care for? Of course, had he been free he would have married her. When he got his freedom he would insist on another ceremony. He could persuade her to that on some excuse or other. But in the meanwhile!

He entered the deserted dining-room, came over to where Rue was waiting, and sat down, heavily, holding an unlighted cigar between his stubby fingers.

“Well, little girl,” he said with forced cheerfulness, “was I away very long?”

“Not very.”

“You didn't miss me?” he inquired, ponderously playful.

His heavy pleasantries usually left her just a little doubtful and confused, for he seldom smiled when he delivered himself of them.

He leaned across the cloth and laid a hot, cushiony hand over both of hers, where they lay primly clasped on the table edge:

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"Don't you ever miss me when I'm away from you, Rue?" he asked.

"I think—it is nice to be with you," she said, hotly embarrassed by the publicity of his caress.

"I don't believe you mean it." But he smiled this time. At which the little rigid smile stamped itself on her lips; but she timidly withdrew her hands from his.

"Rue, I don't believe you love me." This time there was no smile.

She found nothing to answer, being without any experience in give-and-take conversation, which left her always uncertain and uncomfortable.

For the girl was merely a creature still in the making—a soft, pliable thing to be shaped to perfection only by the light touch of some steady, patient hand that understood—or to be marred and ruined by a heavy hand which wrought at random or in brutal haste.

Brandes watched her for a moment out of sleepy, greenish eyes. Then he consulted his watch again, summoned a waiter, gave him the parcels-room checks, and bade him have a boy carry their luggage into the lobby.

As they rose from the table, a man and a woman entering the lobby caught sight of them, halted, then turned and walked back toward the street door which they had just entered.

Brandes had not noticed them where he stood by the desk, scratching off a telegram to Stull:

"All O. K. Just going aboard. Fix it with Stein."

He rejoined Rue as the boy appeared with their luggage; an under porter took the bags and preceded them toward the street.

"There's the car!" said Brandes, with a deep breath

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of relief. "He knows his business, that chauffeur of mine."

Their chauffeur was standing beside the car as they emerged from the hotel and started to cross the sidewalk; the porter, following, set their luggage on the curbstone; and at the same instant a young and pretty woman stepped lightly between Rue and Brandes.

"Good evening, Eddie," she said, and struck him a staggering blow in the face with her white-gloved hand.

Brandes lost his balance, stumbled sideways, recovered himself, turned swiftly and encountered the full, protruding black eyes of Maxy Venem staring close and menacingly into his.

From Brandes' cut lip blood was running down over his chin and collar; his face remained absolutely expressionless. The next moment his eyes shifted, met Ruhannah's stupefied gaze.

"Go into the hotel," he said calmly. "Quick——"

"Stay where you are!" interrupted Maxy Venem, and caught the speechless and bewildered girl by the elbow.

Like lightning Brandes' hand flew to his hip pocket, and at the same instant his own chauffeur seized both his heavy, short arms and held them rigid, pinned behind his back.

"Frisk him!" he panted; Venem nimbly relieved him of the dull black weapon.

"Can the fake gun-play, Eddie," he said, coolly shoving aside the porter who attempted to interfere. "You're double-crossed. We got the goods on you; come on; who's the girl?"

The woman who had struck Brandes now came up again beside Venem. She was young, very pretty, but deathly white except for the patches of cosmetic on



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either cheek. She pointed at Brandes. There was blood on her soiled and split glove:

"You dirty dog!" she said unsteadily. "You'll marry this girl before I've divorced you, will you? And you think you are going to get away with it! You dog! You dirty dog!"

The porter attempted to interfere again, but Venem shoved him out of the way. Brandes, still silently struggling to free his imprisoned arms, ceased twisting suddenly and swung his heavy head toward Venem. His hat had fallen off; his face, deeply flushed with exertion, was smeared with blood and sweat.

"What's the idea, you fool!" he said in a low voice. "I'm not married to her."

But Ruhannah heard him say it.

"You claim that you haven't married this girl?" demanded Venem loudly, motioning toward Rue, who stood swaying, half dead, held fast by the gathering crowd which pushed around them from every side.

"Did you marry her or did you fake it?" repeated Venem in a louder voice. "It's jail one way; maybe both!"

"He married her in Gayfield at eleven this morning!" said the chauffeur. "Parson Smawley turned the trick."

Brandes' narrow eyes glittered; he struggled for a moment, gave it up, shot a deadly glance at Maxy Venem, at his wife, at the increasing throng crowding closely about him. Then his infuriated eyes met Rue's, and the expression of her face apparently crazed him.

Frantic, he hurled himself backward, jerking one arm free, tripped, fell heavily with the chauffeur on top, twisting, panting, struggling convulsively, while all around him surged the excited crowd, pushing, press-

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ing closer, trampling one another in eagerness to see.

Rue, almost swooning with fear, was pushed, jostled, flung aside. Stumbling over her own suitcase, she fell to her knees, rose, and, scarce conscious of what she was about, caught up her suitcase and reeled away into the light-shot darkness.

She had no idea of what she was doing or where she was going; the terror of the scene still remained luridly before her eyes; the shouting of the crowd was in her ears; an indescribable fear of Brandes filled her—a growing horror of this man who had denied that he had married her. And the instinct of a frightened and bewildered child drove her into blind flight, anywhere to escape this hideous, incomprehensible scene behind her.

Hurrying on, alternately confused and dazzled in the patches of darkness and flaring light, clutched at and followed by a terrible fear, she found herself halted on the curbstone of an avenue through which lighted tram-cars were passing. A man spoke to her, came closer; and she turned desperately and hurried across a street where other people were crossing.

From overhead sounded the roaring dissonance of an elevated train; on either side of her phantom shapes swarmed—figures which moved everywhere around her, now illumined by shop windows, now silhouetted against them. And always through the deafening confusion in her brain, the dismay, the stupefaction, one dreadful fear dominated—the fear of Brandes—the dread and horror of this Judas who had denied her.

She could not drive the scene from her mind—the never-to-be forgotten picture where he stood with blood from his cut lip striping his fat chin. She heard his voice denying her through swollen lips that scarcely moved—denying that he had married her.

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And in her ears still sounded the other voice—the terrible words of the woman who had struck him—an unsteady, unreal voice accusing him; and her brain throbbed with the horrible repetition: “Dirty dog—dirty dog—dirty dog——” until, almost out of her mind, she dropped her bag and clapped both hands over her ears.

One or two men stared at her. A taxi driver came from beside his car and asked her if she was ill. But she caught up her suitcase and hurried on without answering.

She was very tired. She had come to the end of the lighted avenue. There was darkness ahead, a wall, trees, and electric lights sparkling among the foliage.

Perhaps the sudden glimpse of a wide and star-set sky quieted her, calmed her. Freed suddenly from the cañon of the city’s streets, the unreasoning panic of a trapped thing subsided a little.

Her arm ached; she shifted the suitcase to her other hand and looked across at the trees and at the high stars above, striving desperately for self-command.

Something had to be done. She must find some place where she could sit down. Where was she to find it?

For a while she could feel her limbs trembling; but gradually the heavy thudding of her pulses quieted; nobody molested her; nobody had followed her. That she was quite lost did not matter; she had also lost this man who had denied her, somewhere in the depths of the confusion behind her. That was all that mattered—escape from him, from the terrible woman who had struck him and reviled him.

With an effort she checked her thoughts and struggled for self-command. Somewhere in the city there

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must be a railroad station from which a train would take her home.

With the thought came the desperate longing for flight, and a rush of tears that almost choked her. Nothing mattered now except her mother's arms; the rest was a nightmare, the horror of a dream which still threatened, still clutched at her with shadowy and spectral menace.

For a moment or two she stood there on the curb, her eyes closed, fighting for self-control, forcing her disorganized brain to duty.

Somebody must help her to find a railroad station and a train. That gradually became clear to her. But when she realised that, a young man sauntered up beside her and looked at her so intently that her calmness gave way and she turned her head sharply to conceal the starting tears.

"Hello, girlie," he said. "Got anythin' on to-night?"

With head averted, she stood there, rigid, dumb, her tear-drenched eyes fixed on the park; and after one or two jocose observations the young man became discouraged and went away. But he had thrust the fear of strangers deep into her heart; and now she dared not ask any man for information. However, when two young women passed she found sufficient courage to accost them, asking the direction of the railroad station from which trains departed for Gayfield.

The women, who were young and brightly coloured in plumage, displayed a sympathetic interest at once.

"Gayfield?" repeated the blonder of the two. "Gee, dearie, I never heard of that place."

"Is it on Long Island?" inquired the other.

"No. It is in Mohawk County."

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"That's a new one, too. Mohawk County? Never heard of it; did you, Lil?"

"Search me!"

"Is it up-state, dearie?" asked the other. "You better go over to Madison Avenue and take a car to the Grand Central——"

"Wait," interrupted her friend; "she better take a taxi——"

"Nix on a taxi you pick up on Sixth Avenue!" And to Rue, curiously sympathetic: "Say, you've got friends here, haven't you, little one?"

"No."

"What! You don't know anyone in New York!"

Rue looked at her dumbly; then, of a sudden, she remembered Neeland.

"Yes," she said, "I know one person."

"Where does your friend live?"

In her reticule was the paper on which he had written the address of the Art Students' League, and, as an afterthought, his own address.

Rue lifted the blue silk bag, opened it, took out her purse and found the paper.

"One Hundred and Six, West Fifty-fifth Street," she read; "Studio No. 10."

"Why, that isn't far!" said the blonder of the two. "We are going that way. We'll take you there."

"I don't know—I don't know him very well——"

"Is it a man?"

"Yes. He comes from my town, Gayfield."

"Oh! I guess that's all right," said the other woman, laughing. "You got to be leery of these men, little one. Come on; we'll show you."

It was only four blocks; Ruhannah presently found herself on the steps of a house from which dangled

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sign, "Studios and Bachelor Apartments to let."

"What's his name?" said the woman addressed as Lil.  
"Mr. Neeland."

By the light of the vestibule lantern they inspected the letter boxes, found Neeland's name, and pushed the electric button.

After a few seconds the door clicked and opened.

"Now, you're all right!" said Lil, peering into the lighted hallway. "It's on the fourth floor and there isn't any elevator that I can see, so you keep on going upstairs till your friend meets you."

"Thank you so much for your great kindness——"

"Don't mention it. Good luck, dearie!"

The door clicked behind her, and Rue found herself alone.

The stairs, flanked by a massive balustrade of some dark, polished wood, ascended in spirals by a series of flights and landings. Twice she rested, her knees almost giving way, for the climb upward seemed interminable. But at last, just above her, she saw a skylight, and a great stair-window giving on a court; and, as she toiled up and stood clinging, breathless, to the banisters on the top landing, out of an open door stepped Neeland's shadowy figure, dark against the full light behind him.

"For heaven's sake!" he said. "What on earth——"

The suitcase fell from her nerveless hand; she swayed a little where she stood.

The next moment he had passed his arm around her, and was half leading, half carrying her through a short hallway into a big, brilliantly lighted studio.

## CHAPTER XII

### A LIFE LINE

SHE had told him her story from beginning to end, as far as she herself comprehended it. She was lying sideways now, in the depths of a large armchair, her cheek cushioned on the upholstered wings.

Her hat, with its cheap blue enamel pins sticking in the crown, lay on his desk; her hair, partly loosened, shadowed a young face grown pinched with weariness; and the reaction from shock was already making her grey eyes heavy and edging the under lids with bluish shadows.

She had not come there with the intention of telling him anything. All she had wanted was a place in which to rest, a glass of water, and somebody to help her find the train to Gayfield. She told him this; remained reticent under his questioning; finally turned her haggard face to the chairback and refused to answer.

For an hour or more she remained obstinately dumb, motionless except for the uncontrollable trembling of her body; he brought her a glass of water, sat watching her at intervals; rose once or twice to pace the studio, his well-shaped head bent, his hands clasped behind his back, always returning to the corner-chair before the desk to sit there, eyeing her askance, waiting for some decision.

But it was not the recurrent waves of terror, the ever latent fear of Brandes, or even her appalling loneliness that broke her down; it was sheer fatigue—nature's

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merciless third degree—under which mental and physical resolution disintegrated—went all to pieces.

And when at length she finally succeeded in reconquering self-possession, she had already stammered out answers to his gently persuasive questions—had told him enough to start the fuller confession to which he listened in utter silence.

And now she had told him everything, as far as she understood the situation. She lay sideways, deep in the armchair, tired, yet vaguely conscious that she was resting mind and body, and that calm was gradually possessing the one, and the nerves of the other were growing quiet.

Listlessly her grey eyes wandered around the big studio where shadowy and strangely beautiful but incomprehensible things met her gaze, like iridescent, indefinite objects seen in dreams.

These radiantly unreal splendours were only Neeland's rejected Academy pictures and studies; a few cheap Japanese hangings, cheaper Nippon porcelains, and several shaky, broken-down antiques picked up for a song here and there. All the trash and truck and dust and junk characteristic of the conventional artist's habitation were there.

But to Ruhannah this studio embodied all the wonders and beauties of that magic temple to which, from her earliest memory, her very soul had aspired—the temple of the unknown God of Art.

Vaguely she endeavoured to realise that she was now inside one of its myriad sanctuaries; that here under her very tired and youthful eyes stood one of its countless altars; that here, also, near by, sat one of those blessed acolytes who aided in the mysteries of its wondrous service.



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"Ruhannah," he said, "are you calm enough to let me tell you what I think about this matter?"

"Yes. I am feeling better."

"Good work! There's no occasion for panic. What you need is a cool head and a clear mind."

She said, without stirring from where she lay resting her cheek on the chairback:

"My mind has become quite clear again."

"That's fine! Well, then, I think the thing for you to do is——" He took out his watch, examined it, replaced it—"Good Lord!" he said. "It is three o'clock!"

She watched him but offered no comment. He went to the telephone, called the New York Central Station, got General Information, inquired concerning trains, hung up, and came back to the desk where he had been sitting.

"The first train out leaves at six three," he said. "I think you'd better go into my bedroom and lie down. I'm not tired; I'll call you in time, and I'll get a taxi and take you to your train. Does that suit you, Ruhannah?"

She shook her head slightly.

"Why not?" he asked.

"I've been thinking. I can't go back."

"Can't go back! Why not?"

"I can't."

"You mean you'd feel too deeply humiliated?"

"I wasn't thinking of my own disgrace. I was thinking of mother and father." There was no trace of emotion in her voice; she stated the fact calmly.

"I can't go back to Brookhollow. It's ended. I couldn't bear to let them know what has happened to me."

"What did you think of doing?" he asked uneasily—

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"I must think of mother—I must keep my disgrace from touching them—spare them the sorrow—humiliation——" Her voice became tremulous, but she turned round and sat up in her chair, meeting his gaze squarely. "That's as far as I have thought," she said. Both remained silent for a long while. Then Runnah looked up from her pale preoccupation:

"I told you I had three thousand dollars. Why n't I educate myself in art with that? Why can't I learn how to support myself by art?"

"Where?"

"Here."

"Yes. But what are you going to say to your parents when you write? They suppose you are on your way to Paris."

She nodded, looking at him thoughtfully.

"By the way," he added, "is your trunk on board the *Lusitania*?"

"Yes."

"That won't do! Have you the check for it?"

"Yes, in my purse."

"We've got to get that trunk off the ship," he said. "There's only one sure way. I'd better go down now, to the pier. Where's your steamer ticket?"

"I—I have *both* tickets and both checks in my bag. —let me have the pleasure of carrying them——" Again her voice broke childishly, but the threatened emotion was strangled and resolutely choked back.

"Give me the tickets and checks," he said. "I'll go down to the dock now."

She drew out the papers, sat holding them for a few moments without relinquishing them. Then she raised her eyes to his, and a bright flush stained her cheeks:

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"Why should I not go to Paris by myself?" she demanded.

"You mean now? On this ship?"

"Yes. Why not? I have enough money to go there and study, haven't I?"

"Yes. But——"

"Why not!" she repeated feverishly, her grey eyes sparkling. "I have three thousand dollars; I can't go back to Brookhollow and disgrace them. What does it matter where I go?"

"It would be all right," he said, "if you'd ever had any experience——"

"Experience! What do you call what I've had to-day!" She exclaimed excitedly. "To lose in a single day my mother, my home—to go through in this city what I have gone through—what I am going through now—is not that enough experience? Isn't it?"

He said:

"You've had a rotten awakening, Rue—a perfectly devilish experience. Only—you've never travelled alone——" Suddenly it occurred to him that his lively friend, the Princess Mistchenka, was sailing on the *Lusitania*; and he remained silent, uncertain, looking with vague misgivings at this girl in the armchair opposite—this thin, unformed, inexperienced child who had attained neither mental nor physical maturity.

"I think," he said at length, "that I told you I had a friend sailing on the *Lusitania* tomorrow."

She remembered and nodded.

"But wait a moment," he added. "How do you know that this—this fellow Brandes will not attempt to sail on her, also——" Something checked him, for in the girl's golden-grey eyes he saw a flame glimmer; something almost terrible came into the child's still

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gaze; and slowly died out like the afterglow of lightning.

And Neeland knew that in her soul something had been born under his very eyes—the first emotion of maturity bursting from the chrysalis—the flaming consciousness of outrage, and the first, fierce assumption of womanhood to resent it.

She had lost her colour now; her grey eyes still remained fixed on his, but the golden tinge had left them.

“I don’t know why you shouldn’t go,” he said abruptly.

“I *am* going.”

“All right! And if *he* has the nerve to go—if he bothers you—appeal to the captain.”

She nodded absently.

“But I don’t believe he’ll try to sail. I don’t believe he’d dare, mixed up as he is in a dirty mess. He’s afraid of the law, I tell you. That’s why he denied marrying you. It meant bigamy to admit it. Anyway, I don’t think a fake ceremony like that is binding; I mean that it isn’t even real enough to put him in jail. Which means that you’re not married, Rue.”

“Does it?”

“I think so. Ask a lawyer, anyway. There may be steps to take—I don’t know. All the same—do you really want to go to France and study art? Do you really mean to sail on this ship?”

“Yes.”

“You feel confidence in yourself? You feel sure of yourself?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got the backbone to see it through?”

“Yes. It’s got to be done.”

“All right, if you feel that way.” He made no mo-

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however, but sat there watching her. After a while he looked at his watch again:

"I'm going to ring up a taxi," he said. "You might as well go on board and get some sleep. What time does she sail?"

"At five thirty, I believe."

"Well, we haven't so very long, then. There's my bedroom—if you want to fix up."

She rose wearily.

When she emerged from his room with her hat and gloves on, the taxicab was audible in the street below.

Together they descended the dark stairway up which she had toiled with trembling knees. He carried her suitcase, aided her into the taxi.

"Cunard Line," he said briefly, and entered the cab.

Already in the darkness of early morning the city was awake; workmen were abroad; lighted tramcars passed with passengers; great wains, trucks, and country wagons moved slowly toward markets and ferries.

He had begun to tell her almost immediately all that he knew about Paris, the life there in the students' quarters, methods of living economically, what to seek and what to avoid—a homily rather hurried and condensed, as they sped toward the pier.

She seemed to be listening; he could not be sure that she understood or that her mind was fixed at all on what he was saying. Even while speaking, numberless objections to her going occurred to him, but as he had no better alternatives to suggest he did not voice them.

In his heart he really believed she ought to go back to Brookhollow. It was perfectly evident she would not consent to go there. As for her remaining in New York, perhaps the reasons for her going to Paris were as good. He was utterly unable to judge; he only knew

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that she ought to have the protection of experience, and that was lacking.

"I'm going to remain on board with you," he said, "until she sails. I'm going to try to find my very good friend, the Princess Mistchenka, and have you meet her. She has been very kind to me, and I shall ask her to keep an eye on you while you are crossing, and to give you a lot of good advice."

"A—princess," said Rue in a tired, discouraged voice, "is not very likely to pay any attention to me, I think."

"She's one of those Russian or Caucasian princesses. You know they don't rank very high. She told me herself. She's great fun—full of life and wit and intelligence and wide experience. She knows a lot about everything and everybody; she's been everywhere, travelled all over the globe."

"I don't think," repeated Rue, "that she would care for me at all."

"Yes, she would. She's young and warm-hearted and human. Besides, she is interested in art—knows a lot about it—even paints very well herself."

"She must be wonderful."

"No—she's just a regular woman. It was because she was interested in art that she came to the League, and I was introduced to her. That is how I came to know her. She comes sometimes to my studio."

"Yes, but you are already an artist, and an interesting man——"

"Oh, Rue, I'm just beginning. She's kind, that's all—an energetic, intelligent woman, full of interest in life. I *know* she'll give you some splendid advice—tell you how to get settled in Paris—Lord! You don't even know French, do you?"

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"No."

"Not a word?"

"No. . . . I don't know anything, Mr. Neeland."

He tried to laugh reassuringly:

"I thought it was to be Jim, not Mister," he reminded her.

But she only looked at him out of troubled eyes.

In the glare of the pier's headlights they descended. Passengers were entering the vast, damp enclosure; porters, pier officers, ship's officers, sailors, passed to and fro as they moved toward the gangway where, in the electric glare of lamps, the clifflike side of the gigantic liner loomed up.

At sight of the monster ship Rue's heart leaped, quailed, leaped again. As she set one slender foot on the gangway such an indescribable sensation seized her that she caught at Neeland's arm and held to it, almost faint with the violence of her emotion.

A steward took the suitcase, preceded them down abysmal and gorgeous stairways, through salons, deep into the dimly magnificent bowels of the ocean giant, then through an endless white corridor twinkling with lights, to a stateroom, where a stewardess ushered them in.

There was nobody there; nobody had been there.

"He dare not come," whispered Neeland in Ruhanah's ear.

The girl stood in the centre of the stateroom looking silently about her.

"Have you any English and French money?" he asked.

"No."

"Give me—well, say two hundred dollars, and I'll have the purser change it."

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She went to her suitcase, where it stood on the lounge; he unstrapped it for her; she found the big packet of treasury notes and handed them to him.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "This won't do. I'm going to have the purser lock them in the safe and give me a receipt. Then when you meet the Princess Mistchenka, tell her what I've done and ask her advice. Will you, Rue?"

"Yes, thank you."

"You'll wait here for me, won't you?"

"Yes."

So he noted the door number and went away hastily in search of the purser, to do what he could in the matter of foreign money for the girl. And on the upper companionway he met the Princess Mistchenka descending, preceded by porters with her luggage.

"James!" she exclaimed. "Have you come aboard to elope with me? Otherwise, what are you doing on the *Lusitania* at this very ghastly hour in the morning?"

She was smiling into his face and her daintily gloved hand retained his for a moment; then she passed her arm through his.

"Follow the porter," she said, "and tell me what brings you here, my gay young friend. You see I am wearing the orchids you sent me. Do you really mean to add yourself to this charming gift?"

He told her the story of Ruhannah Carew as briefly as he could; at her stateroom door they paused while he continued the story, the Princess Mistchenka looking at him very intently while she listened, and never uttering a word.

She was a pretty woman, not tall, rather below middle stature, perhaps, beautifully proportioned and



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fectly gowned. Hair and eyes were dark as velvet; her skin was old ivory and rose; and always her lips seemed about to part a little in the faint and provocative smile which lay latent in the depths of her brown eyes.

"*Mon Dieu!*" she said, "what a history of woe you are telling me, my friend James! What a tale of innocence and of deception and outraged trust is this that you relate to me! *Allons! Vite!* Let us find this poor, abandoned infant—this unhappy victim of your sex's well-known duplicity!"

"She isn't a victim, you know," he explained.

"I see. Only almost—a—victim. Yes? Where is this child, then?"

"May I bring her to you, Princess?"

"But of course! Bring her. I am not afraid—so far—to look any woman in the face at five o'clock in the morning." And the threatened smile flashed out in her fresh, pretty face.

When he came back with Rue Carew, the Princess Mistchenka was conferring with her maid and with her stewardess. She turned to look at Rue as Neeland came up—continued to scrutinise her intently while he was presenting her.

There ensued a brief silence; the Princess glanced at Neeland, then her dark eyes returned directly to the young girl before her, and she held out her hand, smilingly:

"Miss Carew—I believe I know exactly what your voice is going to be like. I think I have heard, in America, such a voice once or twice. Speak to me and prove me right."

Rue flushed:

"What am I to say?" she asked naïvely.

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“I knew I was right,” exclaimed the Princess Mistchenka gaily. “Come into my stateroom and let each one of us discover how agreeable is the other. Shall we—my dear child?”

When Neeland returned from a visit to the purser with a pocket full of British and French gold and silver for Ruhannah, he knocked at the stateroom door of the Princess Mistchenka.

That lively personage opened it, came out into the corridor holding the door partly closed behind her.

“She’s almost dead with fatigue and grief. I undressed her myself. She’s in my bed. She has been crying.”

“Poor little thing,” said Neeland.

“Yes.”

“Here’s her money,” he said, a little awkwardly.

The Princess opened her wrist bag and he dumped in the shining torrent.

“Shall I—call good-bye to her?” he asked.

“You may go in, James.”

They entered together; and he was startled to see how young she seemed there on the pillows—how pitifully immature the childish throat, the tear-flushed face lying in its mass of chestnut hair.

“Good-bye, Rue,” he said, still awkward, offering his hand.

Slowly she held out one slim hand from the covers.

“Good voyage, good luck,” he said. “I wish you would write a line to me.”

“I will.”

“Then——” He smiled; released her hand.

“Thank you for—for all you have done,” she said. “I shall not forget.”

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Something choked him slightly; he forced a laugh:  
"Come back a famous painter, Rue. Keep your head clear and your heart full of courage. And let me know how you're getting on, won't you?"

"Yes. . . . Good-bye."

So he went out, and at the door exchanged adieux with the smiling Princess.

"Do you—like her a little?" he whispered.

"I do, my friend. Also—I like you. I am old enough to say it safely, am I not?"

"If you think so," he said, a funny little laugh in his eyes, "you are old enough to let me kiss you good-bye."

But she backed away, still smiling:

"On the brow—the hair—yes; if you promise discretion, James."

"What has tottering age like yours to do with discretion, Princess Naïa?" he retorted impudently. "A kiss on the mouth must of itself be discreet when bestowed on youth by such venerable years as are yours."

But the Princess, the singularly provocative smile still edging her lips, merely looked at him out of dark and slightly humorous eyes, gave him her hand, withdrew it with decision, and entered her stateroom, closing the door rather sharply behind her.

When Neeland got back to the studio he took a couple of hours' sleep, and, being young, perfectly healthy, and perhaps not unaccustomed to the habits of the owl family, felt pretty well when he went out to breakfast.

Over his coffee cup he propped up his newspaper against a carafe; and the heading on one of the columns immediately attracted his attention.

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**ROW BETWEEN SPORTING MEN  
EDDIE BRANDES, FIGHT PROMOTER AND  
THEATRICAL MAN, MIXES IT WITH  
MAXY VENEM  
A WOMAN SAID TO BE THE CAUSE: APPRAY DRAWS  
A BIG CROWD IN FRONT OF THE HOTEL  
KNICKERBOCKER  
BOTH MEN, BADLY BATTERED, GET AWAY BEFORE THE  
POLICE ARRIVE**

Breakfasting leisurely, he read the partly humorous, partly contemptuous account of the sordid affair. Afterward he sent for all the morning papers. But in none of them was Ruhannah Carew mentioned at all, nobody, apparently, having noticed her in the exciting affair between Venem, Brandes, the latter's wife, and the chauffeur.

Nor did the evening papers add anything material to the account, except to say that Brandes had been interviewed in his office at the Silhouette Theatre and that he stated that he had not engaged in any personal encounter with anybody, had not seen Max Venem in months, had not been near the Hotel Knickerbocker, and knew nothing about the affair in question.

He also permitted a dark hint or two to escape him concerning possible suits for defamation of character against irresponsible newspapers.

The accounts in the various evening editions agreed, however, that when interviewed, Mr. Brandes was nursing a black eye and a badly swollen lip, which, according to him, he had acquired in a playful sparring en-

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counter with his business manager, Mr. Benjamin Stull

And that was all; the big town had neither time nor inclination to notice either Brandes or Venem any further; Broadway completed the story for its own edification, and, by degrees, arrived at its own conclusions. Only nobody could discover who was the young girl concerned, or where she came from or what might be her name. And, after a few days, Broadway also, forgot the matter amid the tarnished tinsel and raucous noises of its own mean and multifarious preoccupations.

## CHAPTER XIII

### LETTERS FROM A LITTLE GIRL

NEELAND had several letters from Ruhannah Carew that autumn and winter. The first one was written a few weeks after her arrival in Paris:

DEAR MR. NEELAND:

Please forgive me for writing to you, but I am homesick.

I have written every week to mother and have made my letters read as though I were still married, because it would almost kill her if she knew the truth.

Some day I shall have to tell her, but not yet. Could you tell me how you think the news ought to be broken to her and father?

*That man* was not on the steamer. I was quite ill crossing the ocean. But the last two days I went on deck with the Princess Mistchenka and her maid, and I enjoyed the sea.

The Princess has been so friendly. I should have died, I think, without her, what with my seasickness and homesickness, and brooding over my terrible fall. I know it is immoral to say so, but I did not want to live any longer, truly I didn't. I even asked to be taken. I am sorry now that I prayed that way.

Well, I have passed through the most awful part of my life, I think. I feel strange and different, as though I had been very sick, and had died, and as though it were another girl sitting here writing to you, and not the girl who was in your studio last August.

I had always expected happiness some day. Now I know I shall never have it. Girls dream many foolish things about the future. They have such dear, silly hopes.

All dreams are ended for me; all that remains in life

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for me is to work very hard so that I can learn to support myself and my parents. I should like to make a great deal of money so that when I die I can leave it to charity. I desire to be remembered for my good works. But of course I shall first have to learn how to take care of myself and mother and father before I can aid the poor. I often think of becoming a nun and going out to nurse lepers. Only I don't know where there are any. Do you?

Paris is very large and a sort of silvery grey colour, full of trees with yellowing leaves—but Oh, it is *so* lonely, Mr. Neeland! I am determined not to cry every day, but it is quite difficult not to. And then there are *so* many, many people, and they all talk French! They talk very fast, too, even the little children.

This seems such an ungrateful letter to write you, who were so good and kind to me in my dreadful hour of trial and disgrace. I am afraid you won't understand how full of gratitude I am, to you and to the Princess Mistchenka.

I have the prettiest little bedroom in her house. There is a pink shade on my night lamp. She insisted that I go home with her, and I had to, because I didn't know where else to go, and she wouldn't tell me. In fact, I can't go anywhere or find any place because I speak no French at all. It's humiliating, isn't it, ~~for~~ even the very little children speak French in Paris.

But I have begun to learn; a cheerful old lady comes for an hour every day to teach me. Only it is very hard for me, because she speaks no English and I am forbidden to utter one word of my own language. And so far I understand nothing that she says, which makes me more lonely than I ever was in all my life. But sometimes it is so absurd that we both laugh.

I am to study drawing and painting at a studio for women. The kind Princess has arranged it. I am also to study piano and voice culture. This I did not suppose would be possible with the money I have, but the Princess Mistchenka, who has asked me to let her take charge of my money and my expenses, says that I can easily afford it. She knows, of course, what things cost, and what I am able to afford; and I trust her willingly because she

## LETTERS FROM A LITTLE GIRL

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is so dear and sweet to me, but I am a little frightened at the dresses she is having made for me. They *can't* be inexpensive!—Such lovely clothes and shoes and hats—and other things about which I never even heard in Brook-hollow.

I ought to be happy, Mr. Neeland, but everything is so new and strange—even Sunday is not restful; and how different is Nôtre Dame de Paris and Saint Eustache from our church at Gayfield! The high arches and jewelled windows and the candles and the dull roar of the organ drove from my mind those quiet and solemn thoughts of God which always filled my mind so naturally and peacefully in our church at home. I couldn't think of Him; I couldn't even try to pray; it was as though an ocean were rolling and thundering over me where I lay drowned in a most deep place.

Well, I must close, because *déjeuner* is ready—you see I know *one* French word, after all! And one other—“*Bonjour, monsieur!*”—which counts *two*, doesn't it?—or three in all.

It has made me feel better to write to you. I hope you will not think it a presumption.

And now I shall say thank you for your great kindness to me in your studio on that most frightful night of my life. It is one of those things that a girl can never, never forget—your aid in my hour of need. Through all my shame and distress it was your help that sustained me; for I was so stunned by my disgrace that I even forgot God himself.

But I *will* prove that I am thankful to Him, and worthy of your goodness to me; I *will* profit by this dreadful humiliation and devote my life to a more worthy and lofty purpose than merely getting married just because a man asked me so persistently and I was too young and ignorant to continue saying no! Also, I *did* want to study art. How stupid, how immoral I was!

And now nobody would ever want to marry me again after this—and also it's against the law, I imagine. But I don't care; I never, never desire to marry another man. All I want is to learn how to support myself by art; and some day perhaps I shall forget what has hap-



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to me and perhaps find a little pleasure in life when I am very old.

With every wish and prayer for your happiness and success in this world of sorrow, believe me your grateful friend,  
RUE CAREW.

Every naïve and laboured line of the stilted letter touched and amused and also flattered Neeland; for no young man is entirely insensible to a young girl's gratitude. An agreeable warmth suffused him; it pleased him to remember that he had been associated in the moral and social rehabilitation of Rue Carew.

He meant to write her some kind, encouraging advice; he had every intention of answering her letter. But in New York young men are very busy; or think they are. For youth days dawn and vanish in the space of a fire-fly's lingering flash; and the moments swarm by like a flight of distracted golden butterflies; and a young man is ever at their heels in breathless chase with as much chance of catching up with the elusive moment as a squirrel has of outstripping the wheel in which he whirls.

So he neglected to reply—waited a little too long. Because, while her childish letter still remained unanswered, came a note from the Princess Mistchenka, enclosing a tremulous line from Rue:

*Mon cher* JAMES:

Doubtless you have already heard of the sad death of Ruhannah's parents—within a few hours of each other—both stricken with pneumonia within the same week. The local minister cabled her as Mrs. Brandes in my care. Then he wrote to the child; the letter has just arrived.

My poor little *protégée* is prostrated—talks wildly of going back at once. But to what purpose now, *mon ami*? Her loved ones will have been in their graves for days before Ruhannah could arrive.

## LETTERS FROM 'A LITTLE GIRL

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No; I shall keep her here. She is young; she shall be kept busy every instant of the day. That is the only antidote for grief; youth and time its only cure.

Please write to the Baptist minister at Gayfield, James, and find out what is to be done; and have it done. Judge Cary, at Orangeville, had charge of the Reverend Mr. Carew's affairs. Let him send the necessary papers to Ruhannah here. I enclose a paper which she has executed, conferring power of attorney. If a guardian is to be appointed, I shall take steps to qualify through the good offices of Lejeune Brothers, the international lawyers whom I have put into communication with Judge Cary through the New York representatives of the firm.

There are bound to be complications, I fear, in regard to this mock marriage of hers. I have consulted my attorneys here and they are not very certain that the ceremony was not genuine enough to require further legal steps to free her entirely. A suit for annulment is possible.

Please have the house at Brookhollow locked up and keep the keys in your possession for the present. Judge Cary will have the keys sent to you.

James, dear, I am very deeply indebted to you for giving to me my little friend, Ruhannah Carew. Now, I wish to make her entirely mine by law until the inevitable day arrives when some man shall take her from me.

Write to her, James; don't be selfish.

Yours always,

NAÏA.

The line enclosed from Ruhannah touched him deeply:

I cannot speak of it yet. Please, when you go to Brookhollow, have flowers planted. You know where our plot is. Have it made pretty for them.

RUE.

He wrote at once exactly the sort of letter that an impulsive, warm-hearted young man might take time to write to a bereaved friend. He was genuinely

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grieved and sorry for her, but he was glad when his letter was finished and mailed, and he could turn his thoughts into other and gayer channels.

To this letter she replied, thanking him for what he had written and for what he had done to make the plot in the local cemetery "pretty."

She asked him to keep the keys to the house in Brook-hollow. Then followed a simple report of her quiet and studious daily life in the home of the Princess Mistchenka; of her progress in her studies; of her hopes that in due time she might become sufficiently educated to take care of herself.

It was a slightly dull, laboured, almost emotionless letter. Always willing to shirk correspondence, he persuaded himself that the letter called for no immediate answer. After all, it was not to be expected that a very young girl whom a man had met only twice in his life could hold his interest very long, when absent. However, he meant to write her again; thought of doing so several times during the next twelve months.

It was a year before another letter came from her. And, reading it, he was a little surprised to discover how rapidly immaturity can mature under the shock of circumstances and exotic conditions which tend toward forced growth.

**MON CHER AMI:**

I was silly enough to hope you might write to me. But I suppose you have far more interesting and important matters to occupy you.

Still, don't you sometimes remember the girl you drove home with in a sleigh one winter night, ages ago? Don't you sometimes think of the girl who came creeping upstairs, half dead, to your studio door? And don't you sometimes wonder what has become of her?

Why is it that a girl is always more loyal to past mem-

## LETTERS FROM A LITTLE GIRL

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ories than a man ever is? Don't answer that it is because she has less to occupy her than a man has. You have no idea how busy I have been during this long year in which you have forgotten me.

Among other things I have been busy growing. I am taller by two inches than when last I saw you. Please be impressed by my five feet eight inches.

Also, I am happy. The greatest happiness in the world is to have the opportunity to learn about that same world.

I am happy because I now have that opportunity. During these many months since I wrote to you I have learned a little French; I read some, write some, understand pretty well, and speak a little. What a pleasure, *mon ami!*

Piano and vocal music, too, occupy me; I love both, and I am told encouraging things. But best and most delightful of all I am learning to draw and compose and paint from life in the Académie Julian! Think of it! It is difficult, it is absorbing, it requires energy, persistence, self-denial; but it is fascinating, satisfying, glorious.

Also, it is very trying, *mon ami*; and I descend into depths of despair and I presently soar up out of those depressing depths into intoxicating altitudes of aspiration and self-confidence.

You yourself know how it is, of course. At the criticism today I was lifted to the seventh heaven. "*Pas mal*," he said; "*continuez, mademoiselle*." Which is wonderful for him. Also my weekly sketch was chosen from among all the others, and I was given number one. That means my choice of *tabourets* on Monday morning, *voyez vous?* So do you wonder that I came home with Suzanne, walking on air, and that as soon as *déjeuner* was finished I flew in here to write to you about it?

Suzanne is our maid—the maid of Princess Naïa, of course—who walks to and from school with me. I didn't wish her to follow me about at first, but the Princess insisted, and I'm resigned to it now.

The Princess Mistchenka is such a darling! I owe her more than I owe anybody except mother and father. She simply took me as I was, a young, stupid, ignorant, awkward country girl with no experience, no *savoir-faire*, no

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clothes, and even no knowledge of how to wear them; and she is trying to make out of me a fairly intelligent and presentable human being who will not offend her by *gaucheries* when with her, and who will not disgrace her when in the circle of her friends.

Oh, of course I still make a *faux pas* now and then, *mon ami*; there are dreadful pitfalls in the French language into which I have fallen more than once. And at times I have almost died of mortification. But everybody is so amiable and patient, so polite, so gay about my mistakes. I am beginning to love the French. And I am learning so much! I had no idea what a capacity I had for learning things. But then, with Princess Naïa, and with my kind and patient teachers and my golden opportunities, even a very stupid girl must learn *something*. And I am not really very stupid; I've discovered that. On the contrary, I really seem to learn quite rapidly; and all that annoys me is that there is so much to learn and the days are not long enough, so anxious am I, so ambitious, so determined to get out of this wonderful opportunity everything I possibly can extract.

I have lived in these few months more years than my own age adds up! I am growing old and wise very fast. Please hasten to write to me before I have grown so old that you would not recognize me if you met me.

Your friend,

RUHANNAH.

The letter flattered him. He was rather glad he had once kissed the girl who could write such a letter.

He happened to be engaged, at that time, in drawing several illustrations for a paper called the *Midweek Magazine*. There was a heroine, of course, in the story he was illustrating. And, from memory, and in spite of the model posing for him, he made the face like the face of Ruhannah Carew.

But the days passed, and he did not reply to her letter. Then there came still another letter from her:

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Why don't you write me just one line? Have you *really* forgotten me? You'd like me if you knew me now, I think. I am really quite grown up. And I am *so* happy!

The Princess is simply adorable. Always we are busy, Princess Naïa and I; and now, since I have laid aside mourning, we go to concerts; we go to plays; we have been six times to the opera, and as many more to the Théâtre Français; we have been to the Louvre and the Luxembourg many times; to St. Cloud, Versailles, Fontainebleau.

Always, when my studies are over, we do something interesting; and I am beginning to know Paris, and to care for it with real affection; to feel secure and happy and at home in this dear, glittering, silvery-grey city—full of naked trees and bridges and palaces. And, sometimes when I feel homesick, and lonely, and when Brookhollow seems very, very far away, it troubles me a little to find that I am not nearly so homesick as I think I ought to be. But I think it must be like seasickness; it is too frightful to last.

The Princess Mistchenka has nursed me through the worst. All I can say is that she is very wonderful.

On her day, which is Thursday, her pretty *salon* is thronged. At first I was too shy and embarrassed to be anything but frightened and self-conscious and very miserable when I sat beside her on her Thursdays. Besides, I was in mourning and did not appear on formal occasions.

Now it is different; I take my place beside her; I am not self-conscious; I am interested; I find pleasure in knowing people who are so courteous, so considerate, so gay and entertaining.

Everybody is agreeable and gay, and I am sorry that I miss so much that is witty in what is said; but I am learning French very rapidly.

The men are polite to me! At first I was so *gauche*, so stupid and provincial, that I could not bear to have anybody kiss my hand and pay me compliments. I've made a lot of other mistakes, too, but I never make the same mistake twice.

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So many interesting men come to our Thursdays; and some women. I prefer the men, I think. There is one old French General who is a dear; and there are young officers, too; and yesterday two cabinet ministers and several people from the British and Russian embassies. And the Turkish Chargé, whom I dislike.

The women seem to be agreeable, and they all are most beautifully gowned. Some have titles. But all seem to be a little too much made up. I don't know any of them except formally. But I feel that I know some of the men better—especially the old General and a young military attaché of the Russian Embassy, whom everybody likes and pets, and whom everybody calls Prince Erlik—such a handsome boy! And his real name is Alak, and I think he is very much in love with Princess Naïa.

Now, something very odd has happened which I wish to tell you about. My father, as you know, was missionary in the Vilayet of Trebizond many years ago. While there he came into possession of a curious sea chest belonging to a German named Conrad Wilner, who was killed in a riot near Gallipoli.

In this chest were, and still are, two very interesting things—an old bronze Chinese figure which I used to play with when I was a child. It was called the Yellow Devil; and a native Chinese missionary once read for us the inscription on the figure which identified it as a Mongol demon called Erlik, the Prince of Darkness.

The other object of interest in the box was the manuscript diary kept by this Herr Wilner to within a few moments of his death. This I have often heard read aloud by my father, but I forget much of it now, and I never understood it all, because I was too young. Now, here is the curious thing about it all. The first time you spoke to me of the Princess Naïa Mistchenka, I had a hazy idea that her name seemed familiar to me. And ever since I have known her, now and then I found myself trying to recollect where I had heard that name, even before I heard it from you.

Suddenly, one evening about a week ago, it came to me that I had heard both the names, Naïa and Mistchenka, when I was a child. Also the name Erlik. The two

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former names occur in Herr Wilner's diary; the latter I heard from the Chinese missionary years ago; and that is why they seemed so familiar to me.

It is so long since I have read the diary that I can't remember the story in which the names Naïa and Mistchenka are concerned. As I recollect, it was a tragic story that used to thrill me.

At any rate, I didn't speak of this to Princess Naïa; but about a week ago there were a few people dining here with us—among others an old Turkish Admiral, Murad Pasha, who took me out. And as soon as I heard *his* name I thought of that diary; and I am sure it was mentioned in it.

Anyway, he happened to speak of Trebizond; and, naturally, I said that my father had been a missionary there many years ago.

As this seemed to interest him, and because he questioned me, I told him my father's name and all that I knew in regard to his career as a missionary in the Trebizond district. And, somehow—I don't exactly recollect how it came about—I spoke of Herr Wilner, and his death at Gallipoli, and how his effects came into my father's possession.

And because the old, sleepy-eyed Admiral seemed so interested and amused, I told him about Herr Wilner's box and his diary and the plans and maps and photographs with which I used to play as a little child.

After dinner, Princess Naïa asked me what it was I had been telling Murad Pasha to wake him up so completely and to keep him so amused. So I merely said that I had been telling the Admiral about my childhood in Brookhollow.

Naturally neither she nor I thought about the incident any further. Murad did not come again; but a few days later the Turkish Chargé d'Affaires was present at a very large dinner given by Princess Naïa.

And two curious conversations occurred at that dinner:

The Turkish Chargé suddenly turned to me and asked me in English whether I were not the daughter of the Reverend Wilbour Carew who once was in charge of the American Mission near Trebizond. I was so surprised



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at the question; but I answered yes, remembering that Murad must have mentioned me to him.

He continued to ask me about my father, and spoke of his efforts to establish a girls' school, first at Brusa, then at Tchardak, and finally near Gallipoli. I told him I had often heard my father speak of these matters with my mother, but that I was too young to remember anything about my own life in Turkey.

All the while we were conversing, I noticed that the Princess kept looking across the table at us as though some chance word had attracted her attention.

After dinner, when the gentlemen had retired to the smoking room, the Princess took me aside and made me repeat everything that Ahmed Mirka had asked me.

I told her. She said that the Turkish Chargé was an old busybody, always sniffing about for all sorts of information; that it was safer to be reticent and let him do the talking; and that almost every scrap of conversation with him was mentally noted and later transcribed for the edification of the Turkish Secret Service.

I thought this very humorous; but going into the little *salon* where the piano was and where the music was kept, while I was looking for an old song by Messager, from "La Basoche," called "Je suis aimé de la plus belle—" Ahmed Mirka's handsome attaché, Colonel Izzet Bey, came up to where I was rummaging in the music cabinet.

He talked nonsense in French and in English for a while, but somehow the conversation led again toward my father and the girls' school at Gallipoli which had been attacked and burned by a mob during the first month after it had been opened, and where the German, Herr Wilner, had been killed.

"Monsieur, your reverend father, must surely have told you stories about the destruction of the Gallipoli school. mademoiselle," he insisted.

"Yes. It happened a year before the mission at Trebizond was destroyed by the Turks," I said maliciously.

"So I have heard. What a pity! Our Osmanli—our peasantry are so stupid! And it was such a fine school. A German engineer was killed there, I believe."

"Yes, my father said so."

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"A certain Herr Conrad Wilner, was it not?"

"Yes. How did you hear of him, Colonel Izzet?"

"It was known in Stamboul. He perished by mistake, I believe—at Gallipoli."

"Yes; my father said that Herr Wilner was the only man hurt. He went out all alone into the mob and began to cut them with his riding whip. My father tried to save him, but they killed Herr Wilner with stones."

"Exactly." He spread his beautifully jewelled hands deprecatingly and seemed greatly grieved.

"And Herr Wilner's—property?" he inquired. "Did you ever hear what became of it?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "My father took charge of it."

"Oh! It was supposed at the time that all of Herr Wilner's personal property was destroyed when the school and compound burned. Do you happen to know just what was saved, mademoiselle?"

Of course I immediately thought of the bronze demon, the box of instruments, and the photographs and papers at home with which I used to play as a child. I remembered my father had said that these things were taken on board the *Oncida* when he, my mother, and I were rescued by marines and sailors from our guard vessel which came through the Bosphorus to the Black Sea, and which escorted us to the *Oncida*. And I was just going to tell this to Izzet Bey when I also remembered what the Princess had just told me about giving any information to Ahmed Pasha. So I merely opened my eyes very innocently and gazed at Colonel Izzet and shook my head as though I did not understand his question.

The next instant the Princess came in to see what I was about so long, and she looked at Izzet Bey with a funny sort of smile, as though she had surprised him in mischief and was not angry, only amused. And when Colonel Izzet bowed, I saw how red his face had grown—as red as his fez.

The Princess laughed and said in French: "That is the difference between professional and amateur—between Nizam and Redif—between Ahmed Pasha and our esteemed but very youthful attaché—who has much yet to learn about that endless war called Peace!"

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I didn't know what she meant, but Izzet Bey turned a bright scarlet, bowed again, and returned to the smoking room.

And that night, while Suzanne was unhooking me, Princess Naïa came into my bedroom and asked me some questions, and I told her about the box of instruments and the diary, and the slippery linen papers covered with drawings and German writing, with which I used to play.

She said never to mention them to anybody, and that I should never permit anybody to examine those military papers, because it might be harmful to America.

How odd and how thrilling! I am most curious to know what all this means. It seems like an exciting story just beginning, and I wonder what such a girl as I has to do with secrets which concern the Turkish Chargé in Paris.

Don't you think it promises to be romantic? Do you suppose it has anything to do with spies and diplomacy and kings and thrones, and terrible military secrets? One hears a great deal about the embassies here being hotbeds of political intrigue. And of course France is always thinking of Alsace and Lorraine, and there is an ever-present danger of war in Europe.

Mr. Neeland, it thrills me to pretend to myself that I am actually living in the plot of a romance full of mystery and diplomacy and dangerous possibilities. I *hope* something will develop, as something always does in novels.

And alas, my imagination, which always has been vivid, needed almost nothing to blaze into flame. It is on fire now; I dream of courts and armies, and ambassadors, and spies; I construct stories in which I am the heroine always—sometimes the interesting and temporary victim of wicked plots; sometimes the all-powerful, dauntless, and adroit champion of honour and righteousness against treachery and evil!

Did you ever suppose that I still could remain such a very little girl? But I fear that I shall never outgrow my imagination. And it needs almost nothing to set me dreaming out stories or drawing pictures of castles and princes and swans and fairies. And even this letter seems a part of some breathlessly interesting plot which I am

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not only creating but actually a living part of and destined to act in.

Do you want a part in it? Shall I include you? Rather late to ask your permission, for I have already included you. And, somehow, I think the Yellow Devil ought to be included, too.

Please write to me, just once. But don't speak of the papers which father had, and don't mention Herr Conrad Wilner's box if you write. The Princess says your letter might be stolen.

I am very happy. It is rather cold tonight, and presently Suzanne will unhook me and I shall put on such a pretty negligée, and then curl up in bed, turn on my reading light with the pink shade, and continue to read the new novel recommended to me by Princess Naïa, called "Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard." It is a perfectly darling story, and Anatole France, who wrote it, must be a darling, too. The Princess knows him and promises that he shall dine with us some day. I expect to fall in love with him immediately.

Good night, dear Mr. Neeland. I *hope* you will write to me.

Your little Gayfield friend grown up,  
RUHANNAH CAREW.

This letter he finally did answer, not voluminously, but with all cordiality. And, in a few days, forgot about it and about the girl to whom it was written. And there was nothing more from her until early summer.

Then came the last of her letters—an entirely mature missive, firm in writing, decisive, concise, self-possessed, eloquent with an indefinite something which betrayed a calmly ordered mind already being moulded by discipline *mondaine*:

MY DEAR MR. NEELAND:

I had your very kind and charming letter in reply to mine written last January. My neglect to answer it, dur-

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ing all these months, involves me in explanations which, if you like, are perhaps due you. But if you require them at all, I had rather surrender them to you personally when we meet.

Possibly that encounter, so happily anticipated on my part, may occur sooner than you believe likely. I permit myself to hope so. The note which I enclose to you from the lady whom I love very dearly should explain why I venture to entertain a hope that you and I are to see each other again in the near future.

As you were kind enough to inquire about myself and what you describe so flatteringly as my "amazing progress in artistic and worldly wisdom," I venture to reply to your questions in order:

They seem to be pleased with me at the school. I have a life-drawing "on the wall," a composition sketch, and a "concourse" study in oil. That I have not burst to atoms with pride is a miracle inexplicable.

I have been told that my progress at the piano is fair. But I am very certain I shall do no more with vocal and instrumental music than to play and sing acceptably for such kind and uncritical friends as do not demand much of an amateur. Without any unusual gifts, with a rather sensitive ear, and with a very slightly cultivated and perfectly childish voice—please do not expect anything from me to please you.

In French I am already becoming fluent. You see, except for certain lessons in it, I have scarcely heard a word of English since I came here; the Princess will not use it to me nor permit its use by me. And therefore, my ear being a musical one and rather accurate, I find—now that I look back upon my abysmal ignorance—a very decided progress.

Also let me admit to you—and I have already done so, I see—that, since I have been here, I have had daily lessons in English with a cultivated English woman; and in consequence I have been learning to enlarge a very meagre vocabulary, and have begun to appreciate possibilities in my own language of which I never dreamed.

About my personal appearance—as long as you ask me—I think perhaps that, were I less thin, I might be rather

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pretty. Dress makes such a vast difference in a plain girl. Also, intelligent care of one's person improves mediocrity. Of course everybody says such gracious things to a girl over here that it would not do to accept any pretty compliment very literally. But I really believe that you might think me rather nice to look at.

As for the future, the truth is that I feel much encouraged. I made some drawings in wash and in pen and ink—just ideas of mine. And Monsieur Bonvard, who is editor of *The Grey Cat*—a very clever weekly—has accepted them and has paid me twenty-five francs each for them! I was so astonished that I could not believe it. One has been reproduced in last week's paper. I have cut it out and pasted it in my scrapbook.

I think, take it all in all, that seeing my first illustrations printed has given me greater joy than I shall ever again experience on earth.

My daily intercourse with the Princess Mistchenka continues to comfort me, inspire me, and fill me with determination so to educate myself that when the time comes I shall be ready and able to support myself with pen and pencil.

And now I must bring my letter to its end. The prospect of seeing you very soon is agreeable beyond words. You have been very kind to me. I do not forget it.

Yours very sincerely,

RUHANNAH CAREW.

The enclosure was a note from the Princess Mistchenka:

DEAR JIM:

If in the past it has been my good fortune to add anything to yours, may I now invoke in you the memory of our very frank and delightful friendship?

When you first returned to America from Paris I found it possible to do for you a few favours in the way of making you known to certain editors. It was, I assure you, merely because I liked you and believed in your work, not because I ever expected to ask from you any favour in return.

## THE DARK STAR

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Now, Fate has thrown an odd combination from her dice-box; and Destiny has veiled herself so impenetrably that nobody can read that awful visage to guess what thoughts possess her.

You, in America, have heard of the murder of the Austrian Archduke, of course. But—have you, in America, any idea what the consequences of that murder may lead to?

Enough of that. Now for the favour I ask.

Will you go *at once* to Brookhollow, go to Ruhannah's house, open it, take from it a chest made of olive wood and bound with some metal which looks like silver, lock the box, take it to New York, place it in a safe deposit vault until you can sail for Paris on the first steamer that leaves New York?

Will you do this—get the box I have described and bring it to me yourself on the first steamer that sails?

And, Jim, keep your eye on the box. Don't trust anybody near it. Rue says that, as she recollects, the box is about the size and shape of a suitcase and that it has a canvas and leather cover with a handle which buttons over it.

Therefore, you can carry it yourself exactly as though it were your suitcase, keep it with you in the train and on shipboard.

Will you do this, Jim? It is much to ask of you. I break in upon your work and cause you great inconvenience and trouble and expense. But—will you do it for me?

Much depends upon your doing this. I think that possibly the welfare of your own country might depend on your doing this for me.

If you find yourself embarrassed financially, cable me just one word, "Black," and I shall arrange matters through a New York bank.

If you feel that you do not care to do me this favour, cable the single word, "White."

If you have sufficient funds, and are willing to bring the box to me yourself, cable the word, "Blue."

In case that you undertake this business for me, be careful of the contents of the box. Let nobody see it

## LETTERS FROM A LITTLE GIRL

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open. Be certain that the contents are absolutely secure. I dare not tell you how vitally important to civilisation these papers already are—how much they may mean to the world; what powers of evil they might encourage if in any way they fall into other hands than the right ones.

Jim, I have seldom taken a very serious tone with you since we have known each other. I am very serious now. And if our friendship means anything to you, prove it!

Yours,

NAÏA.

As he sat there in his studio, perplexed, amazed, annoyed, yet curious, trying to think out what he ought to do—what, in fact, must be done somehow or other—there came a ring at his door bell. A messenger with a cable despatch stood there; Neeland signed, tore open the envelope, and read:

Please go at once to Brookhollow and secure an olive-wood box bound with silver, containing military maps, plans, photographs, and papers written in German, property of Ruhannah Carew. Lose no time, I implore you, as an attempt to rob the house and steal the papers is likely. Beware of anybody resembling a German. Have written, but beg you not to wait for letter.

NAÏA.

Twice he reread the cablegram. Then, with a half-bewildered, half-disgusted glance around at his studio, his belongings, the unfinished work on his easel, he went to the telephone.

It being July he had little difficulty in reserving a good stateroom on the Cunarder *Volhynia*, sailing the following day. Then, summoning the janitor, he packed a steamer trunk and gave order to have it taken aboard that evening.

On his way downtown to his bank he stop at a



## *THE DARK STAR*

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telegraph and cable office and sent a cable message to the Princess Mistchenka. The text consisted of only one word: "Blue."

He departed for Gayfield on the five o'clock afternoon train, carrying with him a suitcase and an automatic pistol in his breast pocket.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A JOURNEY BEGINS

IT WAS a five-hour trip. He dined aboard the train with little desire for food, the July evening being oppressive, and a thunder storm brewing over the Hudson. It burst in the vicinity of Fishkill with a lively display of lightning, deluging the Catskills with rain. And when he changed to a train on the Mohawk division the cooler air was agreeably noticeable.

He changed trains again at Orangeville, and here the night breeze was delightful and the scent of rain-soaked meadows came through the open car window.

It was nearly ten o'clock and already, ahead, he caught sight of the lights of Neeland's Mills. Always the homecoming was a keen delight to him; and now, as he stepped off the train, the old familiar odours were in his nostrils—the unique composite perfume of the native place which never can be duplicated elsewhere.

All the sweet and aromatic and homely smells of earth and land and water came to him with his first deep-drawn breath. The rank growth of wild flowers and weeds were part of it—the flat atmosphere of the mill pond, always redolent of water weed and lily pads, tintured it; distant fields of buckwheat added heavier perfume.

Neither in the quaint brick feed mill nor in the lumber mill were there any lights, but in his own home, almost buried among tall trees and vines, the light streamed from the sitting-room windows.

## THE DARK STAR

From the dark yard two or three dogs barked at him, then barked again in a different key, voicing an excited welcome: and he opened the picket gate and went up the path surrounded by demonstrative setters and pointers, leaping and wagging about him and making a vast amount of noise on the vine-covered verandah as he opened the door, let himself into the house, and shut them out.

"Hello, dad!" he said, crossing swiftly to where his father sat by the reading lamp.

Their powerful grip lingered. Old Dick Neeland, ruddy, white-haired, straight as a pine, stood up in his old slippers and quilted smoking coat, his brier pipe poised in his left hand.

"Splendid, Jim. I've been thinking about you this evening." He might have added that there were few moments when his son was not in his thoughts.

"Are you all right, dad?"

"Absolutely. You are, too, I see."

They seated themselves.

"Hungry, Jim?"

"No; I dined aboard."

"You didn't telegraph me."

"No; I came at short notice."

"Can't you stay?"

"I have a drawing-room reserved for the midnight, and I am sailing on the *Volhymia* tomorrow in the morning!"

"Tell me! Why, Jim?"

"I'll tell you all I know about it."

Father sat with brier pipe suspended and keen eyes fixed on his son, while the son told everything about the reason for his flying trip to Paris. "How is it, don't you, dad?" he ended. "The

## *A JOURNEY BEGINS*

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"Princess has been a good and loyal friend to me. She has used her influence; I have met, through her, the people I ought to know, and they have given me work to do. I'm in her debt; I'm under real obligation to her. And I've got to go, that's all."

Old Dick Neeland's clear eyes of a sportsman continued to study his son's face.

"Yes, you've got to go," he said. He smoked for a few moments, then: "What the devil does it mean, anyway? Have you any notion, Jim?"

"No, I haven't. There seems to be some military papers in this box that is mentioned. Evidently they are of value to somebody. Evidently other people have got wind of that fact and desire to obtain them for themselves. It almost seems as though something is brewing over there—trouble of some sort between Germany and some other nation. But I haven't heard of anything."

His father continued to smoke for a while, then:

"There is something brewing over there, Jim."

"I hadn't heard," repeated the young man.

"I haven't either, directly. But in my business some unusual orders have come through—from abroad. Both France and Germany have been making inquiries through agents in regard to shipments of grain and feed and lumber. I've heard of several very heavy rush orders."

"What on earth could cause war?"

"I can't see, Jim. Of course Austria's attitude toward Servia is very sullen. But outside of that I can see no trouble threatening.

"And yet, the Gayfield woollen mill has just received an enormous order for socks and underwear from the French Government. They're running all night now.

## THE DARK STAR

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And another thing struck me: there has been a man in this section buying horses for the British Government. Of course it's done now and then, but, taking this incident with the others which have come to my personal knowledge, it would seem as though something were brewing over in Europe."

Jim's perplexed eyes rested on his father; he shook his youthful head slightly:

"I can't see why," he said. "But if it's to be France and Germany again, why my sympathy is entirely for France."

"Naturally," nodded his father.

Their Irish ancestors had fought for Bonaparte, and for the Bourbons before him. And, cursed with cousins, like all Irish, they were aware of plenty of Neelands in France who spoke no English.

Jim rose, glanced at his watch:

"Dad, I'll just be running over to Brookhollow to get that box. I haven't such a lot of time, if I'm to catch the midnight train at Orangeville."

"I should say you hadn't," said his father.

He was disappointed, but he smiled as he exchanged a handclasp with his only son.

"You're coming right back from Paris?"

"Next steamer. I've a lot of work on hand, thank goodness! But that only puts me under heavier obligations to the Princess Mistchenka."

"Yes, I suppose so. Anything but ingratitude, Jim. It's the vilest vice of 'em all. They say it's in the Irish blood—ingratitude. They must never prove it by a Neeland. Well, my boy—I'm not lonesome, you understand; busy men have no time to be lonesome—but run up, will you, when you get back?"

"You bet I will."

## *A JOURNEY BEGINS*

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"I'll show you a brace of promising pups. They band rabbits, still, but they won't when the season is over."

"Blue Bird's pups?"

"Yes. They take after her."

"Fine! I'll be back for the shooting, anyway. Many roods this season?"

"A fair number. It was not too wet."

For a moment they lingered, smiling at each other, then Jim gave his father's hand a quick shake, picked up his suitcase, turned.

"I'll take the runabout, dad. Someone from the Orangeville garage will bring it over in the morning."

He went out, pushed his way among the leaping dogs to the garage, threw open the doors, and turned on the electric light.

A slim and trim Snapper runabout stood glistening beside a larger car and two automobile trucks. He exchanged his straw hat for a cap; placed hat and suitcase in the boot; picked up a flash light from the workable, and put it into his pocket, cranked the Snapper, jumped in, ran it to the service entrance, where his father stood ready to check the dogs and close the gates after him.

"Good-bye, dad!" he called out gaily.

"Good-bye, my son."

The next instant he was speeding through the starry darkness, following the dazzling path blazed out for him by his headlights.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE LOCKED HOUSE

FROM the road, just before he descended to cross the bridge into Brookhollow, he caught a gleam of light straight ahead. For a moment it did not occur to him that there was anything strange in his seeing a light in the old Carew house. Then, suddenly, he realised that a light ought not to be burning behind the lowered shades of a house which was supposed to be empty and locked.

His instant impulse was to put on his brakes then and there, but the next moment he realised that his car must already have been heard and seen by whoever had lighted that shaded lamp. The car was already on the old stone bridge; the Carew house stood directly behind the crossroads ahead; and he swung to the right into the creek road and sped along it until he judged that neither his lights nor the sound of his motor could be distinguished by the unknown occupant of the Carew house.

Then he ran his car out among the tall weeds close to the line of scrub willows edging the creek; extinguished his lights, including the tail-lamp; left his engine running; stood listening a moment to the whispering whirr of his motor; then, taking the flash light from his pocket, he climbed over the roadside wall and ran back across the pasture toward the house.

As he approached the old house from the rear, no crack of light was visible, and he began to think he

## *THE LOCKED HOUSE*

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might have been mistaken—that perhaps the dancing glare of his own acetylenes on the windows had made it seem as though they were illuminated from within.

Cautiously he prowled along the rear under the kitchen windows, turned the corner, and went to the front porch.

He had made no mistake; a glimmer was visible between the edge of the lowered shade and the window casing.

Was it some impudent tramp who had preëmpted this lonely house for a night's lodging? Was it, possibly, a neighbour who had taken charge in return for a garden to cultivate and a place to sleep in? Yet, how could it be the latter when he himself had the keys to the house? Moreover, such an arrangement could scarcely have been made by Rue Carew without his being told of it.

Then he remembered what the Princess Mistchenka had said in her cable message, that somebody might break into the house and steal the olive-wood box unless he hastened to Brookhollow and secured it immediately.

Was this what was being done now? Had somebody broken in for that purpose? And who might it be?

A slight chill, not entirely agreeable, passed over Neeland. A rather warm sensation of irritation succeeded it; he mounted the steps, crossed the verandah, went to the door and tried the knob very cautiously. The door was locked; whoever might be inside either possessed a key that fitted or else must have entered by forcing a window.

But Neeland had neither time nor inclination to prowl around and investigate; he had a duty to fulfil, a train to catch, and a steamer to connect with the next morning. Besides, he was getting madder every second.



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So he fitted his key to the door, careless of what noise he made, unlocked and pushed it open, and started to cross the threshold.

Instantly the light in the adjoining room grew dim. At the same moment his quick ear caught a sound as though somebody had blown out the turned-down flame; and he found himself facing total darkness.

"Who the devil's in there!" he called, flashing his electric pocket lamp. "Come out, whoever you are. You've no business in this house, and you know it!" And he entered the silent room.

His flash light revealed nothing except dining-room furniture in disorder, the doors of a cupboard standing open—one door still gently swinging on its hinges.

The invisible hand that had moved it could not be far away. Neeland, throwing his light right and left, caught a glimpse of another door closing stealthily, ran forward and jerked it open. His lamp illuminated an empty passageway; he hurried through it to the door that closed the farther end, tore it open, and deluged the sitting-room with his blinding light.

Full in the glare, her face as white as the light itself, stood a woman. And just in time his eyes caught the glitter of a weapon in her stiffly extended hand; and he snapped off his light and ducked as the level pistol-flame darted through the darkness.

The next second he had her in his grasp; held her writhing and twisting; and, through the confused trampling and heavy breathing, he noticed a curious crackling noise as though the clothing she wore were made of paper.

The struggle in pitch darkness was violent but brief: she managed to fire again as he caught her right arm and felt along it until he touched the desperately

## ***THE LOCKED HOUSE***

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clenched pistol. Then, still clutching her closed fingers, he pulled the flash light from his side pocket and threw its full radiance straight into her face.

"Let go your pistol," he breathed.

She strove doggedly to retain it, but her slender fingers slowly relaxed under his merciless grip; the pistol fell; and he kicked the pearl-handled, nickel-plated weapon across the dusty board floor.

They both were panting; her right arm, rigid, still remained in his powerful clutch. He released it presently, stepped back, and played the light over her from head to foot.

She was deathly white. Under her smart straw hat, which had been pushed awry, the contrast between her black hair and eyes and her chalky skin was startling.

"What are you doing in this house?" he demanded, still breathing heavily from exertion and excitement.

She made an effort:

"Is it your house?" she gasped.

"It isn't yours, is it?" he retorted.

She made no answer.

"Why did you shoot at me?"

She lifted her black eyes and stared at him. Her breast rose and fell with her rapid breathing, and she placed both hands over it as though to quiet it.

"Come," he said, "I'm in a hurry. I want an explanation from you——"

The words died on his lips as she whipped a knife out of her bosom and flew at him. Through the confusion of flash light and darkness they reeled, locked together, but he caught her arm again, jerking it so violently into the air that he lifted her off her feet.

"That's about all for tonight," he panted, twisting the knife out of her helpless hand and flinging it be-

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hind him. Without further ceremony, he pulled out his handkerchief, caught her firmly, reached for her other arm, jerked it behind her back, and tied both wrists. Then he dragged a chair up and pushed her on it.

Her hat had fallen off, and her hair sagged to her neck. The frail stuff of which her waist was made had been badly torn, too, and hung in rags from her right shoulder.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

As she made no reply, he went over and picked up the knife and the pistol. The knife was a silver-mounted Kurdish dagger; the engraved and inlaid blade appeared to be dull and rusty. He examined it for a few moments, glanced inquiringly at her where she sat, pale and mute on the chair, with both wrists tied behind her.

"You seem to be a connoisseur of antiques," he said. "Your dagger is certainly a collector's gem, and your revolver is equally out of date. I recommend an automatic the next time you contemplate doing murder."

Walking up to her he looked curiously into her dark eyes, but he could detect no expression in them.

"Why did you come here?" he demanded.

No answer.

"Did you come to get an olive-wood box bound with silver?"

A slight colour tinted the ashy pallor under her eyes.

He turned abruptly and swept the furniture with his searchlight, and saw on a table her coat, gloves, wrist bag, and furled umbrella; and beside them what appeared to be her suitcase, open. It had a canvas and leather cover: he walked over to the table, turned back the cover of the suitcase and revealed a polished box

## THE LOCKED HOUSE

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of olive wood, heavily banded by some metal resembling silver.

Inside the box were books, photographs, a bronze Chinese figure, which he recognised as the Yellow Devil, a pair of revolvers, a dagger very much like the one he had wrested from her. *But there were no military plans there.*

He turned to his prisoner:

"Is everything here?" he asked sharply.

"Yes."

He picked up her wrist bag and opened it, but discovered only some money, a handkerchief, a spool of thread and packet of needles.

There was a glass lamp on the table. He managed to light it finally; turned off his flash light, and examined the contents of the box again thoroughly. Then he came back to where she was seated.

"Get up," he said.

She looked at him sullenly without moving.

"I'm in a hurry," he repeated; "get up. I'm going to search you."

At that she bounded to her feet.

"What!" she exclaimed furiously.

But he caught hold of her, held her, untied the handkerchief, freeing her wrists.

"Now, pull out those papers you have concealed under your clothing," he said impatiently. And, as she made no motion to comply: "If you don't, I'll do it for you!"

"You dare lay your hand on me!" she flamed.

"You treacherous little cat, do you think I'll hesitate?" he retorted. "Do you imagine I retain any respect for you or your person? Give me those papers!"

"I have no papers!"

## THE DARK STAR

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"You are lying. Listen to me once for all; I've a train to catch and a steamer to catch, and I'm going to do both. And if you don't instantly hand out those papers you've concealed I'll have no more compunction in taking them by force than I'd have in stripping an ear of corn! Make up your mind and make it up quick!"

"You mean you'd strip—*me!*" she stammered, scarlet to her hair.

"That's what I mean, you lying little thief. That's just what I mean. Kick and squall as you like, I'll take those papers with me if I have to take your clothing too!"

Breathless, infuriated, she looked desperately around her, caught sight of the Kurdish dagger, leaped at it; and for the third time found herself struggling in his arms.

"Don't!" she gasped. "Let me go! I—I'll give you what you want——"

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

He released the dishevelled girl, who shrank away from him. But the devil himself glowed in her black eyes.

"Go out of the room," she said, "if I'm to get the papers for you!"

"I can't trust you," he answered. "I'll turn my back." And he walked over to the olive-wood box, where the weapons lay.

Standing there he heard, presently, the rustle of crumpling papers, heard a half-smothered sob, waited, listening, alert for further treachery on her part.

"Hurry!" he said.

## THE LOCKED HOUSE

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A board creaked.

"Don't move again!" he cried. The floor boards creaked once more; and he turned like a flash to find her in her stocking feet, already halfway to where he stood. In either hand she held out a bundle of papers; and, as they faced each other, she took another step toward him.

"Stand where you are," he warned her. "Throw those papers on the floor!"

"I——"

"Do you hear!"

Looking him straight in the eyes she opened both hands; the papers fell at her feet, and with them dropped the two dagger-like steel pins which had held her hat.

"Now, go and put on your shoes," he said contemptuously, picking up the papers and running over them. When he had counted them, he came back to where she was standing.

"Where are the others?"

"What others?"

"The remainder of the papers! You little devil, they're wrapped around your body! Go into that pantry! Go quick! Undress and throw out every rag you wear!"

She drew a deep, quivering breath, turned, entered the pantry and closed the door. Presently the door opened a little and her clothing dropped outside in a heap.

There were papers in her stockings, papers stitched to her stays, basted inside her skirts. A roll of drawings traced on linen lay on the floor, still retaining the warmth of her body around which they had been wrapped.

## ***THE DARK STAR***

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He pulled the faded embroidered cover from the old piano and knocked at the pantry door.

"Put that on," he said, "and come out."

She emerged, swathed from ankle to chin, her flushed face shadowed by her fallen mass of dark hair. He turned his flash light on the cupboard, but discovered nothing more. Then he picked up her hat, clothes, and shoes, laid them on the pantry shelf, and curtly bade her go back and dress.

"May I have the lamp and that looking glass?"

"If you like," he said, preoccupied with the papers.

While she was dressing, he repacked the olive-wood box. She emerged presently, carrying the lamp, and he took it from her hurriedly, not knowing whether she might elect to throw it at his head.

While she was putting on her jacket he stood watching her with perplexed and sombre gaze.

"I think," he remarked, "that I'll take you with me and drop you at the Orangeville jail on my way to town. Be kind enough to start toward the door."

As she evinced no inclination to stir he passed one arm around her and lifted her along a few feet; and she turned on him, struggling, her face convulsed with fury.

"Keep your insolent hands off me," she said. "Do you hear?"

"Oh, yes, I hear." He nodded again toward the door. "Come," he repeated impatiently; "move on!"

She hesitated; he picked up the olive-wood box, extinguished the lamp, opened his flash, and motioned with his head, significantly. She walked ahead of him, face lowered.

Outside he closed and locked the door of the house.

"This way," he said coldly. "If you refuse, I'll pick

## THE LOCKED HOUSE

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you up and carry you under my arm. I think by this time you realise I can do it, too."

Halfway across the dark pasture she stopped short in her tracks.

"Have I *got* to carry you?" he demanded sharply.

"Don't have me locked up."

"Why not?"

"I'm not a—a thief."

"Oh! Excuse me. What are you?"

"You know. Don't humiliate me."

"Answer my question! What are you if you're not a lady crook?"

"I'm employed—as *you* are! Play the game fairly." She halted in the dark pasture, but he motioned her to go forward.

"If you don't keep on walking," he said, "I'll pick you up as I would a pet cat and carry you. Now, then, once more, who are you working for? By whom are you employed, if you're not a plain thief?"

"The—Turkish Embassy."

"What!"

"You knew it," she said in a low voice, walking through the darkness beside him.

"What is your name?" he insisted.

"Dumont."

"What else?"

"Ilse Dumont."

"That's French."

"It's Alsatian German."

"All right. Now, why did you break into that house?"

"To take what you took."

"To steal these papers for the Turkish Embassy?"

"To *take* them."



## THE DARK STAR

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"For the Turkish Ambassador!" he repeated incredulously.

"No; for his military attaché."

"What are you, a spy?"

"You knew it well enough. You are one, also. But you have treated me as though I were a thief. You'll be killed for it, I hope."

"You think I'm a spy?" he asked, astonished.

"What else are you?"

"A spy?" he repeated. "Is *that* what *you* are? And you suppose me to be one, too? That's funny. That's extremely——" He checked himself, looked around at her. "What are you about?" he demanded. "What's that in your hand?"

"A cigarette."

They had arrived at the road. He got over the wall with the box; she vaulted it lightly.

In the darkness he caught the low, steady throbbing of his engine, and presently distinguished the car standing where he had left it.

"Get in," he said briefly.

"I am not a thief! Are you going to lay that charge against me?"

"I don't know. Is it worse than charging you with three separate attempts to murder me?"

"Are you going to take me to jail?"

"I'll see. You'll go as far as Orangeville with me, anyhow."

"I don't care to go."

"I don't care whether you want to go or not. Get into the car!"

She climbed to the seat beside the wheel; he tossed in the olive-wood box, turned on his lamps, and took the wheel.

## *THE LOCKED HOUSE*

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"May I have a match for my cigarette?" she asked meekly.

He found one, scratched it; she placed a very thick and long cigarette between her lips and he lighted it for her.

Just as he threw in the clutch and the car started, the girl blew a shower of sparks from the end of her cigarette, rose in her seat, and flung the lighted cigarette high into the air. Instantly it burst into a flare of crimson fire, hanging aloft as though it were a fire balloon, and lighting up road and creek and bushes and fields with a brilliant strontium glare.

Then, far in the night, he heard a motor horn screech three times.

"You young devil!" he said, increasing the speed. "I ought to have remembered that every snake has its mate. . . . If you offer to touch me—if you move—if you as much as lift a finger, I'll throw you into the creek!"

The car was flying now, reeling over the dirt road like a drunken thing. He hung grimly to the wheel, his strained gaze fixed on the shaft of light ahead, through which the road streamed like a torrent.

A great wind roared in his ears; his cap was gone. The car hurled itself forward through an endless tunnel of darkness lined with silver. Presently he began to slow down; the furious wind died away; the streaking darkness sped by less swiftly.

"Have you gone mad?" she cried in his ear. "You'll kill us both!"

"Wait," he shouted back; "I'll show you and your friends behind us what speed really is."

The car was still slowing down as they passed over a wooden bridge where a narrow road, partly washed out,

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turned to the left and ran along a hillside. Into this he steered.

"Who is it chasing us?" he asked curiously, still incredulous that any embassy whatever was involved in this amazing affair.

"Friends."

"More Turks?"

She did not reply.

He sat still, listening for a few moments, then hastily started his car down the hill.

"Now," he said, "I'll show you what this car of mine really can do! Are you afraid?"

She said between her teeth:

"I'd be a fool if I were not. All I pray for is that you'll kill yourself, too."

"We'll chance it together, my murderous little friend."

The wind began to roar again as they rushed downward over a hill that seemed endless. She clung to her seat and he hung to his wheel like grim death; and, for one terrible instant, she almost lost consciousness.

Then the terrific pace slackened; the car, running swiftly, was now speeding over a macadam road; and Neeland laughed and cried in her ear:

"Better light another of your hell's own cigarettes if you want your friends to follow us!"

Slowing, he drove with one hand on the wheel.

"Look up there!" he said, pointing high at a dark hillside. "See their lights? They're on the worst road in the Gayfield hills. We cut off three miles this way."

Still driving with one hand, he looked at his watch, laughed contentedly, and turned to her with the sudden and almost friendly toleration born of success and of danger shared in common.

## THE LOCKED HOUSE

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"That was rather a reckless bit of driving," he admitted. "Were you frightened?"

"Ask yourself how you'd feel with a fool at the wheel."

"We're all fools at times," he retorted, laughing. "You were when you shot at me. Suppose I'd been seized with panic. I might have turned loose on you, too."

For a while she remained silent, then she looked at him curiously:

"Were you armed?"

"I carry an automatic pistol in my portfolio pocket."

She shrugged.

"You were a fool to come into that house without carrying it in your hand."

"Where would you be now if I had done that?"

"Dead, I suppose," she said carelessly. . . . "What *are* you going to do with me?"

He was in excellent humour with himself; exhilaration and excitement still possessed him, keyed him up.

"Fancy," he said, "a foreign embassy being mixed up in a plain case of grand larceny!—robbing with attempt to murder! My dear but bloodthirsty young lady, I can hardly comprehend it."

She remained silent, looking straight in front of her.

"You know," he said, "I'm rather glad you're not a common thief. You've lots of pluck—plenty. You're as clever as a cobra. It isn't every poisonous snake that is clever," he added, laughing.

"What do you intend to do with me?" she repeated coolly.

"I don't know. You are certainly an interesting companion. Maybe I'll take you to New York with me. You see I'm beginning to like you."

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She was silent.

He said:

"I never before met a real spy. I scarcely believed they existed in time of peace, except in novels. Really, I never imagined there were any spies working for embassies, except in Europe. You are, to me, such a rare specimen," he added gaily, "that I rather dread parting with you. Won't you come to Paris with me?"

"Does what you say amuse you?"

"What *you* say does. Yes, I think I'll take you to New York, anyway. And as we journey toward that great metropolis together you shall tell me all about your delightful profession. You shall be a Scheherazade to me! Is it a bargain?"

She said in a pleasant, even voice:

"I might as well tell you now that what you've been stupid enough to do tonight is going to cost you your life."

"What!" he exclaimed laughingly. "More murder? Oh, Scheherazade! Shame on your naughty, naughty behaviour!"

"Do you expect to reach Paris with those papers?"

"I do, fair houri! I do, Rose of Stamboul!"

"You never will."

"No?"

"No." She sat staring ahead of her for a few moments, then turned on him with restrained impatience:

"Listen to me, now! I don't know who you are. If you're employed by any government you are a novice——"

"Or an artist!"

"Or a consummate artist," she admitted, looking at him uncertainly.

"I *am* an artist," he said.

## THE LOCKED HOUSE

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"You have an excellent opinion of yourself."

"No. I'm telling you the truth. My name is Neeland—James Neeland. I draw little pictures for a living—nice little pictures for newspapers and magazines."

His frankness evidently perplexed her.

"If that is so," she said, "what interests you in the papers you took from me?"

"Nothing at all, my dear young lady! *I'm* not interested in them. But friends of mine are."

"Who?"

He merely laughed at her.

"*Are* you an agent for any government?"

"Not that I know of."

She said very quietly:

"You make a terrible mistake to involve yourself in this affair. If you are not paid to do it—if you are not interested from patriotic motives—you had better keep aloof."

"But it's too late. I *am* mixed up in it—whatever it may mean. Why not tell me, Scheherazade?"

His humorous badinage seemed only to make her more serious.

"Mr. Neeland," she said quietly, "if you really are what you say you are, it is a dangerous and silly thing that you have done tonight."

"Don't say that! Don't consider it so tragically. I'm enjoying it all immensely."

"Do you consider it a comedy when a woman tries to kill you?"

"Maybe you are fond of murder, gentle lady."

"Your sense of humour seems a trifle perverted. I am more serious than I ever was in my life. And I tell you very solemnly that you'll be killed if you try to

## THE DARK STAR

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take those papers to Paris. Listen!"—she laid one hand lightly on his arm—"Why should you involve yourself—you, an American? This matter is no concern of yours——"

"What matter?"

"The matter concerning those papers. I tell you it does not concern you; it is none of your business. Let me be frank with you: the papers are of importance to a foreign government—to the German Government. And in no way do they threaten your people or your country's welfare. Why, then, do you interfere? Why do you use violence toward an agent of a foreign and friendly government?"

"Why does a foreign and friendly government employ spies in a friendly country?"

"All governments do."

"Is that so?"

"It is. America swarms with British and French agents."

"How do you know?"

"It's my business to know, Mr. Neeland."

"Then that *is* your profession! You really are a spy?"

"Yes."

"And you pursue this ennobling profession with an enthusiasm which does not stop short of murder!"

"I had no choice."

"Hadn't you? Your business seems to be rather a deadly one, doesn't it, Scheherazade?"

"Yes, it might become so. . . . Mr. Neeland, I have no personal feeling of anger for you. You offered me violence; you behaved brutally, indecently. But I want you to understand that no petty personal feeling incites me. The wrong you have done me is nothing; the

## *THE LOCKED HOUSE*

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injury you threaten to do my country is very grave. I ask you to believe that I speak the truth. It is in the service of my country that I have acted. Nothing matters to me except my country's welfare. Individuals are nothing; the Fatherland everything. . . . Will you give me back my papers?"

"No. I shall return them to their owner."

"Is that final?"

"It is."

"I am sorry," she said.

A moment later the lights of Orangeville came into distant view across the dark and rolling country.



## CHAPTER XVI

### SCHEHERAZADE

At the Orangeville garage Neeland stopped his car, put on his straw hat, got out carrying suitcase and box, entered the office, and turned over the care of the machine to an employee with orders to drive it back to Neeland's Mills the next morning.

Then he leisurely returned to his prisoner who had given him her name as Ilse Dumont and who was standing on the sidewalk beside the car.

"Well, Scheherazade," he said, smiling, "teller of marvellous tales, I don't quite believe your stories, but they were extremely entertaining. So I won't bowstring you or cut off your unusually attractive head! No! On the contrary, I thank you for your wonder-tales, and for not murdering me. And, furthermore, I bestow upon you your liberty. Have you sufficient cash to take you where you desire to waft yourself?"

All the time her dark, unsmiling eyes remained fixed on him, calmly unresponsive to his badinage.

"I'm sorry I had to be rough with you, Scheherazade," he continued, "but when a young lady sews her clothes full of papers which don't belong to her, what, I ask you, is a modest young man to do?"

She said nothing.

"It becomes necessary for that modest young man to can his modesty—and the young lady's. Is there anything else he could do?" he repeated gaily.

## SCHEHERAZADE

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"He had better return those papers," she replied in a low voice.

"I'm sorry, Scheherazade, but it isn't done in ultra-crooked circles. Are you sure you have enough money to go where destiny and booty call you?"

"I have what I require," she answered dryly.

"Then good-bye, Pearl of the Harem! Without rancour, I offer you the hand that reluctantly chastened you."

They remained facing each other in silence for a moment; his expression was mischievously amused; hers inscrutable. Then, as he patiently and good-humouredly continued to offer her his hand, very slowly she laid her own in it, still looking him directly in the eyes.

"I'm sorry," she said in a low voice.

"For what? For not shooting me?"

"I'm sorry for *you*, Mr. Neeland. . . . You're only a boy, after all. You know nothing. And you refuse to learn. . . . I'm sorry. . . . Good-bye."

"Could I take you anywhere? To the Hotel Orange? I've time. The station is across the street."

"No," she said.

She walked leisurely along the poorly lighted street and turned the first corner as though at hazard. The next moment her trim and graceful figure had disappeared.

With his heart still gay from the night's excitement, and the drop of Irish blood in him lively as champagne, he crossed the square briskly, entered the stuffy station, bought a ticket, and went out to the wooden platform beside the rails.

Placing box and suitcase side by side, he seated himself upon them and lighted a cigarette.

Here was an adventure! Whether or not he under-

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stood it, here certainly was a real, story-book adventure at last. And he began to entertain a little more respect for those writers of romance who have so persistently attempted to convince an incredulous world that adventures are to be had anywhere and at any time for the mere effort entailed in seeking them.

In his case, however, he had not sought adventure. It had been thrust upon him by cable.

And now the drop of Irish in him gratefully responded. He was much obliged to Fate for his evening's entertainment; he modestly ventured to hope for favours to come. And, considering the coolly veiled threats of this young woman whom he had treated with scant ceremony, he had some reason to expect a sequel to the night's adventure.

"She," he thought to himself, "had nothing on *Godiva*—except a piano cover!"

Recollection of the absurd situation incited his reprehensible merriment to the point of unrestrained laughter; and he clasped his knees and rocked to and fro, where he sat on his suitcase, all alone under the stars.

The midnight express was usually from five to forty minutes late at Orangeville; but from there east it made up time on the down grade to Albany.

And now, as he sat watching, far away along the riverside a star came gliding into view around an unseen curve—the headlight of a distant locomotive.

A few moments later he was in his drawing-room, seated on the edge of the couch, his door locked, the shade over the window looking on the corridor drawn down as far as it would go; and the train rushing through the starry night on the down grade toward Albany.

He could not screen the corridor window entirely;

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the shade seemed to be too short; but it was late, the corridor dark, all the curtains in the car closed tightly over the berths, and his privacy was not likely to be disturbed. And when the conductor had taken both tickets and the porter had brought him a bottle of mineral water and gone away, he settled down with great content.

Neeland was in excellent humour. He had not the slightest inclination to sleep. He sat on the side of his bed, smoking, the olive-wood box lying open beside him, and its curious contents revealed.

But now, as he carefully examined the papers, photographs, and drawings, he began to take the affair a little more seriously. And the possibility of further trouble raised his already high spirits and caused that little drop of Irish blood to sing agreeably in his veins.

Dipping into Herr Wilner's diary added a fillip to the increasing fascination that was possessing him.

"Well, I'm damned," he thought, "if it doesn't really look as though the plans of these Turkish forts might be important! I'm not very much astonished that the Kaiser and the Sultan desire to keep for themselves the secrets of these fortifications. They really belong to them, too. They were drawn and planned by a German." He shrugged. "A rotten alliance!" he muttered, and picked up the bronze Chinese figure to examine it.

"So you're the Yellow Devil I've heard about!" he said. "Well, you certainly are a pippin!"

Inspecting him with careless curiosity, he turned the bronze over and over between his hands, noticing a slight rattling sound that seemed to come from within but discovering no reason for it. And, as he curiously

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considered the scowling demon, he hummed an old song of his father's under his breath:

"Wan balmy day in May  
Th' ould Nick come to the dure;  
Sez I 'The divil's to pay,  
An' the debt comes harrd on the poor!  
His eyes they shone like fire  
An' he gave a horrid groan;  
Sez I to me sister Suke,  
  'Suke!!!!  
Tell him I ain't at home!"

"He stood forinst the dure,  
His wings were wings of a bat,  
An' he raised his voice to a roar,  
An' the tail of him switched like a cat,  
'O wirra the day!' sez I,  
'Ochone I'll no more roam!  
Sez I to me brother Luke,  
  'Luke!!!!  
Tell him I ain't at home!"

As he laid the bronze figure away and closed, locked and strapped the olive-wood box, an odd sensation crept over him as though somebody were overlooking what he was doing. Of course it could not be true, but so sudden and so vivid was the impression that he rose, opened the door, and glanced into the private washroom—even poked under the bed and the opposite sofa; and of course discovered that only a living skeleton could lie concealed in such spaces.

His courage, except moral courage, had never been particularly tested. He was naturally quite fearless, even carelessly so, and whether it was the courage of ignorance or a constitutional inability to be afraid never bothered his mind because he never thought about it.

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Now, amused at his unusual fit of caution, he stretched himself out on his bed, still dressed, debating in his mind whether he should undress and try to sleep, or whether it were really worth while before he boarded the steamer.

And, as he lay there, a cigarette between his lips, wakeful, his restless gaze wandering, he suddenly caught a glimpse of something moving—a human face pressed to the dark glass of the corridor window between the partly lowered shade and the cherry-wood sill.

So amazed was he that the face had disappeared before he realised that it resembled the face of Ilse Dumont. The next instant he was on his feet and opening the door of the drawing-room; but the corridor between the curtained berths was empty and dark and still; not a curtain fluttered.

He did not care to leave his doorway, either, with the box lying there on his bed; he stood with one hand on the knob, listening, peering into the dusk, still excited by the surprise of seeing her on the same train that he had taken.

However, on reflection, he quite understood that she could have had no difficulty in boarding the midnight train for New York without being noticed by him; because he was not expecting her to do such a thing and he had paid no attention to the group of passengers emerging from the waiting room when the express rolled in.

“This is rather funny,” he thought. “I wish I could find her. I wish she’d be friendly enough to pay me a visit. Scheherazade is certainly an entertaining girl. And it’s several hours to New York.”

He lingered a while longer, but seeing and hearing

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nothing except darkness and assorted snores, he stepped into his stateroom and locked the door again.

Sleep was now impossible; the idea of Scheherazade prowling in the dark corridor outside amused him intensely, and aroused every atom of his curiosity. Did the girl really expect an opportunity to steal the box? Or was she keeping a sinister eye on him with a view to summoning accomplices from vasty metropolitan deeps as soon as the train arrived? Or, having failed at Brookhollow, was she merely going back to town to report "progress backward"?

He finished his mineral water, and, still feeling thirsty, rang, on the chance that the porter might still be awake and obliging.

Something about the entire affair was beginning to strike him as intensely funny, and the idea of foreign spies slinking about Brookhollow; the seriousness with which this young girl took herself and her mission; her amateur attempts at murder; her solemn mention of the Turkish Embassy—all these excited his sense of the humorous. And again incredulity crept in; and presently he found himself humming Irwin's immortal Kaiser refrain:

"Hi-lee! Hi-lo!  
Der vinds dey blow  
Joost like die wacht am Rhine!  
Und vot iss mine belongs to me,  
Und vot iss yours iss mine!"

There came a knock at his door; he rose and opened it, supposing it to be the porter; and was seized in the powerful grasp of two men and jerked into the dark corridor.

One of them had closed his mouth with a gloved hand,

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crushing him with an iron grip around the neck; the other caught his legs and lifted him bodily; and, as they slung him between them, his startled eyes caught sight of Ilse Dumont entering his drawing-room.

It was a silent, fierce struggle through the corridor to the front platform of the vestibule train; it took both men to hold, overpower, and completely master him; but they tried to do this and, at the same time, lift the trap that discloses the car steps. And could not manage it.

The instant Neeland realised what they were trying to do, he divined their shocking intention in regard to himself, and the struggle became terrible there in the swaying vestibule. Twice he nearly got at the automatic pistol in his breast pocket, but could not quite grasp it. They slammed him and thrashed him around between them, apparently determined to open the trap, fling him from the train, and let him take his chances with the wheels.

Then, of a sudden, came a change in the fortunes of war; they were trying to drag him over the chain sagging between the forward mail-car and the Pullman, when one of them caught his foot on it and stumbled backward, releasing Neeland's right arm. In the same instant he drove his fist into the face of his other assailant so hard that the man's head jerked backward as though his neck were broken, and he fell flat on his back.

Already the train was slowing down for the single stop between Albany and New York—Hudson. Neeland got out his pistol and pointed it shakily at the man who had fallen backward over the chain.

"Jump!" he panted. "Jump quick!"

The man needed no other warning; he opened the



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trap, scrambled and wriggled down the mail-car steps, and was off the train like a snake from a sack.

The other man, bloody and ghastly white, crept under the chain after his companion. He was a well-built, good-looking man of forty, with blue eyes and a golden beard all over blood. He seemed sick from the terrific blow dealt him; but as the train had almost stopped, Neeland pushed him off with the flat of his foot.

Drenched in perspiration, dishevelled, bruised, he slammed both traps and ran back into the dark corridor, and met Ilse Dumont coming out of his stateroom carrying the olive-wood box.

His appearance appeared to stupefy her; he took the box from her without resistance, and, pushing her back into the stateroom, locked the door.

Then, still savagely excited, and the hot blood of battle still seething in his veins, he stood staring wick- edly into her dazed eyes, the automatic pistol hanging from his right fist.

But after a few moments something in her naïve as- tonishment—her amazement to see him alive and stand- ing there before her—appealed to him as intensely ludi- crous; he dropped on the edge of the bed and burst into laughter uncontrolled.

“Scheherazade! Oh, Scheherazade!” he said, weak with laughter, “if you could only see your face! If you could only *see* it, my dear child! It’s too funny to be true! It’s too funny to be a real face! Oh, dear, I’ll die if I laugh any more. You’ll assassinate me with your face!”

She seated herself on the lounge opposite, still gazing blankly at him in his uncontrollable mirth.

After a while he put back the automatic into his

## SCHEHERAZADE

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breast pocket, took off coat and waistcoat, without paying the slightest heed to her or to convention; opened his own suitcase, selected a fresh shirt, tie, and collar, and, taking with him his coat and the olive-wood box, went into the little washroom.

He scarcely expected to find her there when he emerged, cooled and refreshed; but she was still there, seated as he had left her on the lounge.

"I wanted to ask you," she said in a low voice, "did you *kill* them?"

"Not at all, Scheherazade," he replied gaily. "The Irish don't kill; they beat up their friends; that's all. Fist and blackthorn, my pretty lass, but nix for the knife and gun."

"How—did you do it?"

"Well, I got tired having a ham-fisted Dutchman pawing me and closing my mouth with his big splay fingers. So I asked him to slide overboard and shoved his friend after him."

"Did you shoot them?"

"No, I tell you!" he said disgustedly. "I hadn't a chance in hot blood, and I couldn't do it in cold. No, Scheherazade, I didn't shoot. I pulled a gun for dramatic effect, that's all."

After a silence she asked him in a low voice what he intended to do with her.

"Do? Nothing! Chat affably with you until we reach town, if you don't mind. Nothing more violent than that, Scheherazade."

The girl, sitting sideways on the sofa, leaned her head against the velvet corner as though very tired. Her small hands lay in her lap listlessly, palms upturned.

"Are you really tired?" he asked.

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"Yes, a little."

He took the two pillows from his bed and placed them on the sofa.

"You may lie down if you like, Scheherazade."

"Won't you need them?"

"Sunburst of my soul, if I pillow my head on anything while you are in the vicinity, it will be on that olive-wood box!"

For the first time the faintest trace of a smile touched her lips. She turned, settled the pillows to her liking, and stretched out her supple figure on the sofa with a slight sigh.

"Shall I talk to you, Scheherazade, or let you snuggle into the chaste arms of Morpheus?"

"I can't sleep."

"Is it a talk-fest, then?"

"I am listening."

"Then, were the two recent gentlemen who so rudely pounced upon me the same gentlemen who so cheerfully chased me in an automobile when you made red fire?"

"Yes."

"I was betting on it. Nice-looking man—the one with the classical map and the golden Frick."

She said nothing.

"Scheherazade," he continued with smiling malice, "do you realise that you are both ornamental and young? Why so young and murderous, fair houri? Why delight in manslaughter in any degree? Why cultivate assault and battery? Why swipe the property of others?"

She closed her eyes on the pillow, but, as he remained silent, presently opened them again.

"I asked them not to hurt you," she said irrelevantly.

## SCHEHERAZADE

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"Who? Oh, your strenuous friends with the footpad technique? Well, they obeyed you unwillingly."

"Did they hurt you?"

"Oh, no. But the car-wheels might have."

"The car-wheels?"

"Yes. They were all for dumping me down the steps of the vestibule. But I've got a nasty disposition, Scheherazade, and I kicked and bit and screamed so lustily that I disgusted them and they simply left the train and concluded to cut my acquaintance."

It was evident that his good-humoured mockery perplexed her. Once or twice the shadow of a smile passed over her dark eyes, but they remained uncertain and watchful.

"You really were astonished to see me alive again, weren't you?" he asked.

"I was surprised to see you, of course."

"Alive?"

"I told you that I asked them not to really hurt you."

"Do you suppose I believe *that*, after your pistol practice on me?"

"It is true," she replied, her eyes resting on him.

"You wished to reserve me for more pistol practice?"

"I have no—enmity—for you."

"Oh, Scheherazade!" he protested, laughing.

"You are wrong, Mr. Neeland."

"After all I did to you?"

To his surprise a bright blush spread over her face where it lay framed by the pillows; she turned her head abruptly and lay without speaking.

He sat thinking for a few minutes, then leaning forward from where he sat on the bed's edge:

"After a man's been shot at and further intimidated

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with a large, unpleasantly rusty Kurdish dagger, he is likely to proceed without ceremony. All the same, I am sorry I had to humiliate you, Scheherazade."

She lay silent, unstirring.

"A girl would never forgive that, I know," he said. "So I shall look for a short shrift from you if your opportunity ever comes."

The girl appeared to be asleep. He stood up and looked down at her. The colour had faded from the one cheek visible. For a while he listened to her quiet breathing, then, the imp of perversity seizing him, and intensely diverted by the situation, he bent over her, touched her cheek with his lips, put on his hat, took box and suitcase, and went out to spend the remaining hour or two in the smoking room, leaving her to sleep in peace.

But no sooner had he closed the door on her than the girl sat straight up on the sofa, her face surging in colour, and her eyes brilliant with starting tears.

When the train arrived at the Grand Central Station, in the grey of a July morning, Neeland, finding the stateroom empty, lingered to watch for her among the departing passengers.

But he lingered in vain; and presently a taxicab took him and his box to the Cunard docks, and deposited him there. And an hour later he was in his cabin on board that vast ensemble of machinery and luxury, the Cunarder *Volhynia*, outward bound, and headed straight at the dazzling disc of the rising sun.

And thought of Scheherazade faded from his mind as a tale that is told.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A WHITE SKIRT

It was in mid-ocean that Neeland finally came to the conclusion that nobody on board the *Volhynia* was likely to bother him or his box.

The July weather had been magnificent—blue skies, a gentle wind, and a sea scarcely silvered by a comber.

Assorted denizens of the Atlantic took part in the traditional vaudeville performance for the benefit of the *Volhynia* passengers; gulls followed the wake to mid-ocean; Mother Carey's chickens skimmed the baby billows; dolphins turned watery flip-flaps under the bows; and even a distant whale consented to oblige.

Everybody pervaded the decks morning, noon, and evening; the most squeamish recovered confidence in twenty-four hours; and every constitutional lubber concluded he was a born sailor.

Neeland really was one; no nausea born from the bad adjustment of that anatomical auricular gyroscope recently discovered in man ever disturbed his abdominal nerves. Short of shipwreck, he enjoyed any entertainment the Atlantic offered him.

So he was always on deck, tranquilly happy and with nothing in the world to disturb him except his responsibility for the olive-wood box.

He dared not leave it in his locked cabin; he dared not entrust it to anybody; he lugged it about with him wherever he went. On deck it stood beside his steamer chair; it dangled from his hand when he pro

## THE DARK STAR

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exciting the amazement and curiosity of others; it reposed on the floor under the table and beneath his attentive feet when he was at meals.

These elaborate precautions indicated his wholesome respect for the persistence of Scheherazade and her friends; he was forever scanning his fellow-voyagers at table, in the smoking room, and as they strolled to and fro in front of his steamer chair, trying to make up his mind concerning them.

But Neeland, a clever observer of externals, was no reader of character. The passenger list never seemed to confirm any conclusions he arrived at concerning any of the passengers on the *Volhynia*. A gentleman he mistook for an overfed broker turned out to be a popular clergyman with outdoor proclivities; a slim, poetic-looking youth who carried a copy of "Words and Wind" about the deck travelled for the Gold Leaf Lard Company.

Taking them all in all, Neeland concluded that they were as harmless a collection of *reconcentrados* as he had ever observed; and he was strongly tempted to leave the box in his locked stateroom.

He decided to do so one afternoon after luncheon, and, lugging his box, started to return to his stateroom with that intention, instead of going on deck, as usual, for a postprandial cigarette.

There was nobody in the main corridor as he passed, but in the short, carpeted passage leading to his stateroom he caught a glimpse of a white serge skirt vanishing into the stateroom opposite to his, and heard the door close and the noise of a key turned quickly.

His steward, being questioned on the first day out, had told him that this stateroom was occupied by an invalid gentleman travelling alone, who preferred to

## *A WHITE SKIRT*

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remain there instead of trusting to his crutches on a temperamental deck.

Neeland, passing the closed and curtained door, wondered whether the invalid had made a hit, or whether he had a relative aboard who wore a white serge skirt, white stockings and shoes, and was further endowed with agreeable ankles.

He fitted his key to his door, turned it, withdrew the key to pocket it; and immediately became aware that the end of the key was sticky.

He entered the stateroom, however, and bolted the door, then he sat down on his sofa and examined his fingers and his door key attentively. There was wax sticking to both.

When he had fully digested this fact he wiped and pocketed his key and cast a rather vacant look around the little stateroom. And immediately his eye was arrested by a white object lying on the carpet between the bed and the sofa—a woman's handkerchief, without crest or initials, but faintly scented.

After he became tired of alternately examining it and sniffing it, he put it in his pocket and began an uneasy tour of his room.

If it had been entered and ransacked, everything had been replaced exactly as he had left it, as well as he could remember. Nothing excepting this handkerchief and the wax on the key indicated intrusion; nothing, apparently, had been disturbed; and yet there was the handkerchief; and there was the wax on the end of his door key.

"Here's a fine business!" he muttered to himself; and rang for his steward.

The man came—a cockney, dense as his native fog—who maintained that nobody could have entered t



## THE DARK STAR

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stateroom without his knowledge or the knowledge of the stewardess.

"Do you think *she's* been in my cabin?"

"No, sir."

"Call her."

The stewardess, an alert, intelligent little woman with a trace of West Indian blood in her, denied entering his stateroom. Shown the handkerchief and invited to sniff it, she professed utter ignorance concerning it, assured him that no lady in her section used that perfume, and offered to show it to the stewardesses of other sections on the chance of their identifying the perfume or the handkerchief.

"All right," said Neeland; "take it. But bring it back. And here's a sovereign. And—one thing more. If anybody pays you to deceive me, come to me and I'll outbid them. Is that a bargain?"

"Yes, sir," she said unblushingly.

When she had gone away with the handkerchief, Neeland closed the door again and said to the steward:

"Keep an eye on my door. I am positive that somebody has taken a wax impression of the keyhole. What I said to that stewardess also holds good with you. I'll outbid anybody who bribes you."

"Very good, sir."

"Sure it's good! It's devilish good. Here's a beautiful and newly minted gold sovereign. Isn't it artistic? It's yours, steward."

"Thanky, sir."

"Not at all. And, by the way, what's that invalid gentleman's name?"

"'Awks, sir."

"Hawks?"

"Yes, sir; Mr. 'Erbert 'Awks."

## A WHITE SKIRT

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"American?"

"I don't know, sir."

"British?"

"Shall I inquire, sir?" starting to go.

"Not of *him!* Don't be a lunatic, steward! Please try to understand that I want nothing said about this matter or about my inquiries."

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then! Find out, if you can, who Mr. Herbert Hawks is. Find out all you can concerning him. It's easy money, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes, sir——"

"Wait a moment. Has he any friends or relatives on board?"

"Not that I know, sir."

"Oh, no friends, eh? No ladies who wear white serge skirts and white shoes and stockings?"

"No, sir, not as I knows of."

"Oh! Suppose you step across to his door, knock, and ask him if he rang. And, if the door is opened, take a quick slant at the room."

"Very good, sir."

Neeland, his door at the crack, watched the steward cross the corridor and knock at the door of Mr. Herbert Hawks.

"Well, what iss it?" came a heavy voice from within.

"Mr. 'Awws, sir, did you ring?"

"No, I did not."

"Oh, beg pardon, sir——"

The steward was starting to return to Neeland, but that young man motioned him violently away from his door and closed it. Then, listening, his ear against the panel, he presently heard a door in the passage creak open a little way, then close again, stealthily.

## *THE DARK STAR*

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He possessed his soul in patience, believing that Mr. Hawks or his fair friend in the white skirt had merely taken a preliminary survey of the passage and perhaps also of his closed door. But the vigil was vain; the door did not reopen; no sound came from the stateroom across the passageway.

To make certain that the owner of the white shoes and stockings did not leave that stateroom without his knowledge, he opened his door with many precautions and left it on the crack, stretching a rubber band from knob to bolt, so that the wind from the open port in the passage should not blow it shut. Then, drawing his curtain, he sat down to wait.

He had a book, one of those slobbering American novels which serve up falsehood thickly buttered with righteousness and are consumed by the morally sterilised.

And, as he smoked he read; and, as he read he listened. One eye always remained on duty; one ear was alert; he meant to see who was the owner of the white shoes if it took the remainder of the voyage to find out.

The book aided him as a commonplace accompaniment aids a soloist—alternately boring and exasperating him.

It was an “uplift” book, where the heroine receives whacks with patient smiles. Fate boots her from pillar to post and she blesses Fate and is much obliged. That most deadly reproach to degenerate human nature—the accidental fact of sex—had been so skilfully extirpated from those pages that, like chaste amoebæ, the characters merely multiplied by immaculate subdivision; and millions of lineal descendants of the American Dodo were made gleeful for \$1.50 net.

## A WHITE SKIRT

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It was hard work waiting, harder work reading, but between the two and a cigarette now and then Neeland managed to do his sentry go until dinner time approached and the corridors resounded with the trample of the hungry.

The stewardess reappeared a little later and returned to him his handkerchief and the following information:

Mr. Hawks, it appeared, travelled with a trained nurse, whose stateroom was on another deck. That nurse was not in her stateroom, but a similar handkerchief was, scented with similar perfume.

"You're a wonder," said Neeland, placing some more sovereigns in her palm and closing her fingers over them. "What is the nurse's name?"

"Miss White."

"Very suitable name. Has she ever before visited Herr—I mean *Mr.*—Hawks in his stateroom?"

"Her stewardess says she has been indisposed since we left New York."

"Hasn't been out of her cabin?"

"No."

"I see. Did you inquire what she looked like?"

"Her stewardess couldn't be certain. The stateroom was kept dark and the tray containing her meals was left at the bedside. Miss White smokes."

"Yes," said Neeland reflectively, "she smokes Red Light cigarettes, I believe. Thank you, very much. More sovereigns if you are discreet. And say to my steward that I'll dine in my stateroom. Soup, fish, meat, any old thing you can think of. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

When she had withdrawn he kneeled down on his

## THE DARK STAR

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sofa and looked out through the port at the sunset sea.

There was a possibility that Scheherazade and her friends might be on board the *Volhynia*. Who else would be likely to take wax impressions of his keyhole and leave a scented scrap of a handkerchief on his stateroom floor?

That they had kept themselves not only out of sight but off the passenger list merely corroborated suspicion. That's what they'd be likely to do.

And now there was no question in his mind of leaving the box in his cabin. He'd cling to it like a good woman to alimony. Death alone could separate his box from him.

As he knelt there, sniffing the salt perfume of the sea, his ears on duty detected the sound of a tray in the corridor.

"Leave it on the camp-table outside my door!" he said over his shoulder.

"Very good, sir."

He was not hungry; he was thinking too hard.

"Confound it," he thought to himself, "am I to squat here in ambush for the rest of the trip?"

The prospect was not agreeable for a man who loved the sea. All day and most of the starry night the hurricane deck called to him, and his whole anatomy responded. And now to sit hunched up here like a rat in the hold was not to his taste. Suppose he should continue to frequent the deck, carrying with him his box, of course. He might never discover who owned the white serge skirt or who owned the voice which pronounced it as "iss."

Meanwhile, it occurred to him that for a quarter of an hour or more his dinner outside his door had been

## *A WHITE SKIRT*

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wing colder and colder. So he slid from the sofa, trapped the rubber band, opened the door, lifted the plate and tray into his stateroom with a sharp glance at the door, opened the opposite door, and, readjusting the rubber band, resumed himself to eat.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### BY RADIO

PERHAPS it was because he did not feel particularly hungry that his dinner appeared unappetising; possibly because it had been standing in the corridor outside his door for twenty minutes, which did not add to its desirability.

The sun had set and the air in the room had grown cold. He felt chilly; and, when he uncovered the silver tureen and discovered that the soup was still piping hot, he drank some of it to warm himself.

He had swallowed about half a cupful before he discovered that the seasoning was not agreeable to his palate. In fact, the flavour of the hot broth was so decidedly unpleasant that he pushed aside the cup and sat down on the edge of his bunk without any further desire to eat anything.

A glass of water from the carafe did not seem to rid him of the subtle, disagreeable taste lingering in his mouth—in fact, the water itself seemed to be tainted with it.

He sat for a few moments fumbling for his cigarette case, feeling curiously uncomfortable, as though the slight motion of the ship were affecting his head.

As he sat there looking at the unlighted cigarette in his hand, it fell to the carpet at his feet. He started to stoop for it, caught himself in time, pulled himself erect with an effort.

Something was wrong with him—very wrong. Every

## BY RADIO

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uneven breath he drew seemed to fill his lungs with the odour of that strange and volatile flavour he had noticed. It was beginning to make him giddy; it seemed to affect his vision, too.

Suddenly a terrible comprehension flashed through his confused mind, clearing it for a moment.

He tried to stand up and reach the electric bell; his knees seem incapable of sustaining him. Sliding to the floor, he attempted to crawl toward the olive-wood box; managed to get one arm around it, grip the handle. Then, with a last desperate effort, he groped in his breast pocket for the automatic pistol, freed it, tried to fire it. But the weapon and the unnerved hand that held it fell on the carpet. A muscular paralysis set in like the terrible rigidity of death; he could still see and hear as in a thickening dream.

A moment later, from the corridor, a slim hand was inserted between the door and jamb; the supple fingers became busy with the rubber band for a moment, released it. The door opened very slowly.

For a few seconds two dark eyes were visible between door and curtain, regarding intently the figure lying prone upon the floor. Then the curtain was twitched noiselessly aside; a young woman in the garb of a trained nurse stepped swiftly into the stateroom on tip-toe, followed by a big, good-looking, blue-eyed man wearing a square golden beard.

The man, who carried with him a pair of crutches, but who did not appear to require their aid, hastily set the dinner-tray and camp-table outside in the corridor, then closed and bolted the door.

Already the nurse was down on her knees beside the fallen man, trying to loosen his grasp on the box. Then her face blanched.



## THE DARK STAR

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"It's like the rigor of death itself," she whispered fearfully over her shoulder. "Could I have given him enough to kill him?"

"He took only half a cup and a swallow of water. No."

"I can't get his hand free——"

"Wait! I try!" He pulled a big, horn-handled clasp-knife from his pocket and deliberately opened the eight-inch blade.

"What are you doing?" she whispered, seizing his wrist. "Don't do that!"

The man with the golden beard hesitated, then shrugged, pocketed his knife, and seized Neeland's rigidly clenched hand.

"You are right. It makes too much muss!" tugging savagely at the clenched and unconscious hand. "Sacreminton! What for a death-grip is this *Kerl's*? If I cut his hand off so iss there blood and gossip right away already. No—too much muss. Wait! I try another way——"

Neeland groaned.

"Oh, don't! Don't!" faltered the girl. "You're breaking his wrist——"

"Ugh!" grunted her companion; "I try; I can it not accomplish. See once if the box opens?"

"It is locked."

"Search this pig-dog for the key!"

She began a hurried search of Neeland's clothing; presently discovered her own handkerchief; thrust it into her apron pocket, and continued rummaging while the bearded man turned his attention to the automatic pistol. This he finally succeeded in disengaging, and he laid it on the wash basin.

"Here are his keys," whispered the nurse feverishly,

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holding them up against the dim circle of evening sky framed by the open port. "You had better light the stateroom; I can't see. Hurry! I think he is beginning to recover."

When the bearded man had switched on the electric light he returned to kneel once more beside the inert body on the floor, and began to pull and haul and tug at the box and attempt to insert the key in the lock. But the stiffened clutch of the drugged man made it impossible either to release the box or get at the key-hole.

"*Ach, was! Verflüchtete' schwein-hund*——!" He seized the rigid hand and, exerting all the strength of a brutally inflamed fury, fairly ripped loose the fingers.

"*Also!*" he panted, seizing the stiffened body from the floor and lifting it. "Hold you him by the long and Yankee legs once, *und* I push him out——"

"Out of the port?"

"*Gewiss!* Otherwise he recovers to raise some hell!"

"It is not necessary. How shall this man know?"

"You left your handkerchief. He iss no fool. He makes a noise. No, it iss safer we push him overboard."

"I'll take the papers to Karl, and then I can remain in my stateroom——"

"*No!* Lift his legs, I tell you! You want I hold him in my arms all day while you talk, talk, talk! You take his legs right away quick——!"

He staggered a few paces forward with his unwieldy burden and, setting one knee on the sofa, attempted to force Neeland's head and shoulders through the open port. At the same moment a rapid knocking sounded outside the stateroom door.

"Quick!" breathed the nurse. "Throw him on his bed!"

## THE DARK STAR

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The blue-eyed, golden-bearded man hesitated, then as the knocking sounded again, imperative, persistent, he staggered to the bed with his burden, laid it on the pillows, seized his crutches, rested on them, breathing heavily, and listening to the loud and rapid knocking outside the door.

"We've got to open," she whispered. "Don't forget that we found him unconscious in the corridor!" And she slid the bolt noiselessly, opened the stateroom door, and stepped outside the curtain into the corridor.

The cockney steward stood there with a messenger.

"Wireless for Mr. Neeland——" he began; but his speech failed and his jaw fell at sight of the nurse in her cap and uniform. And when, on his crutches, the bearded man emerged from behind the curtain, the steward's eyes fairly protruded.

"The young gentleman is ill," explained the nurse coolly. "Mr. Hawks heard him fall in the corridor and came out on his crutches to see what had happened. I chanced to be passing through the main corridor, fortunately. I am doing what I can for the young gentleman."

"Ow," said the steward, staring over her shoulder at the bearded man on crutches.

"There iss no need of calling the ship's doctor," said the man on crutches. "This young woman iss a hospital nurse *und* she iss so polite and obliging to volunteer her service for the poor young gentleman."

"Yes," she said carelessly, "I can remain here for an hour or two with him. He requires only a few simple remedies—I've already given him a sedative, and he is sleeping very nicely."

"Yess, yess; it iss not grave. Pooh! It is notting. He slip and knock his head. Maybe too much tcham-

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pagne. He sleep, and by and by he feel better. It iss not advisable to make a fuss. So! We are not longer needed, steward. I return to my room."

And, nodding pleasantly, the bearded man hobbled out on his crutches and entered his own stateroom across the passage.

"Steward," said the nurse pleasantly, "you may leave the wireless telegram with me. When Mr. Neeland wakes I'll read it to him——"

"Give that telegram to *me!*" burst out a ghostly voice from the curtained room behind her.

Every atom of colour left her face, and she stood there as though stiffened into marble. The steward stared at her. Still staring, he passed gingerly in front of her and entered the curtained room.

Neeland was lying on his bed as white as death; but his eyes fluttered open in a dazed way:

"Steward," he whispered.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Neeland."

"My—box." His eyes closed.

"Box, sir?"

"Where—is—it?"

"Which box, sir? Is it this one here on the floor?"—lifting the olive-wood box in its case. The key was in the lock; the other keys hung from it, dangling on a steel ring.

The nurse stepped calmly into the room.

"Steward," she said in her low, pleasant voice, "the sedative I gave him has probably confused his mind a little——"

"Put that box—under—my head," interrupted Neeland's voice like a groan.

"I tell you," whispered the nurse, "he doesn't know what he is saying."

## THE DARK STAR

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"I got to obey him, ma'am——"

"I forbid you——"

"Steward!" gasped Neeland.

"Sir?"

"My box. I—want it."

"Certainly, sir——"

"Here, beside my—pillow."

"Yes, sir." He laid the box beside the sick man.

"Is it locked, steward?"

"Key sticking in it, sir. Yes, it's locked, sir."

"Open."

The nurse, calm, pale, tight-lipped, stood by the curtain looking at the bed over which the steward leaned, opening the box.

"'Ere you are, sir," he said, lifting the cover. "I say, nurse, give 'im a lift, won't you?"

The nurse coolly stepped to the bedside, stooped, raised the head and shoulders of the prostrate man. After a moment his eyes unclosed; he looked at the contents of the box with a perceptible effort.

"Lock it, steward. Place it beside me. . . . Next the wall. . . . So. . . . Place the keys in my pocket. . . . Thank you. . . . I had a—pistol."

"Sir?"

"A pistol. Where is it?"

The steward's roving glance fell finally upon the washbasin. He walked over, picked up the automatic, and, with an indescribable glance at the nurse, laid it across Neeland's upturned palm.

The young man's fingers fumbled it, closed over the handle; and a ghost of a smile touched his ashen face.

"Do you feel better, sir?"

"I'm tired. . . . Yes, I feel—better."

"Can I do anything for you, Mr. Neeland?"

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"Stay outside—my door."

"Do you wish the doctor, sir?"

"No. . . . No! . . . Don't call him; do you hear?"

"I won't call him, sir."

"No, don't call him."

"No, sir. . . . Mr. Neeland, there is a—a trained nurse here. You will not want her, will you, sir?"

Again the shadow of a smile crept over Neeland's face.

"Did she come for—her handkerchief?"

There was a silence; the steward looked steadily at the nurse; the nurse's dark eyes were fixed on the man lying there before her.

"You shan't be wanting her any more, shall you, sir?" repeated the steward, not shifting his gaze.

"Yes; I think I shall want her—for a little while." . . . Neeland slowly opened his eyes, smiled up at the motionless nurse: "How are you, Scheherazade?" he said weakly. And, to the steward, with an effort: "Miss White and I are—old friends. . . . However—kindly remain outside—my door. . . . And throw what remains of my dinner—out of—the port. . . . And be ready—at all times—to look after the—gentleman on crutches. . . . I'm—fond of him. . . . Thank you, steward."

Long after the steward had closed the stateroom door, Ilse Dumont stood beside Neeland's bed without stirring. Once or twice he opened his eyes and looked at her humorously. After a while he said:

"Please be seated, Scheherazade."

She calmly seated herself on the edge of his couch.

"Horrid soup," he murmured. "You should attend a cooking school, my dear."

## THE DARK STAR

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She regarded him absently, as though other matters absorbed her.

"Yes," he repeated, "as a cook you're a failure, Scheherazade. That broth which you seasoned for me has done funny things to my eyes, too. But they're recovering. I see much better already. My vision is becoming sufficiently clear to observe how pretty you are in your nurse's cap and apron."

A slow colour came into her face and he saw her eyebrows bend inward as though she were annoyed.

"You *are* pretty, Scheherazade," he repeated. "You know you are, don't you? But you're a poor cook and a rotten shot. You can't be perfection, you know. Cheer up!"

She ignored the suggestion, her dark eyes brooding and remote again; and he lay watching her with placid interest in which no rancour remained. He was feeling decidedly better every minute now. He lifted the automatic pistol and shoved it under his pillow, then cautiously flexed his fingers, his arms, and finally his knees, with increasing pleasure and content.

"Such dreadful soup," he said. "But I'm a lot better, thank you. Was it to have been murder this time, too, Scheherazade? Would the entire cupful have made a pretty angel of me? Oh, fie! Naughty Scheherazade!"

She remained mute.

"Didn't you mean manslaughter with intent to exterminate?" he insisted, watching her.

Perhaps she was thinking of her blond and bearded companion, and the open port, for she made no reply.

"Why didn't you let him heave me out?" inquired Neeland. "Why did you object?"

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At that she reddened to the roots of her hair, understanding that what she feared had been true—that Neeland, while physically helpless, had retained sufficient consciousness to be aware of what was happening to him and to understand at least a part of the conversation.

“What was the stuff with which you flavoured that soup, Scheherazade?”

He was merely baiting her; he did not expect any reply; but, to his surprise, she answered him:

“Threlanium—Speyer’s solution is what I used,” she said with a sort of listless effrontery.

“Don’t know it. Don’t like it, either. Prefer other condiments.”

He lifted himself on one elbow, remained propped so, tore open his wireless telegram, and, after a while, contrived to read it:

“JAMES NEELAND,  
“S. S. *Volhynia*.

“Spies aboard. Be careful. If trouble threatens captain has instructions British Government to protect you and order arrests on your complaint.

“NAÏA.”

With a smile that was almost a grin, Neeland handed the telegram to Ilse Dumont.

“Scheherazade,” he said, “you’ll be a good little girl, now, won’t you? Because it would be a shocking thing for you and your friend across the way to land in England wearing funny bangles on your wrists and keeping step with each other, wouldn’t it?”

She continued to hold the slip of paper and stare at it long after she had finished reading it and the words became a series of parallel blurs.



## *THE DARK STAR*

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"Scheherazade," he said lightly, "what on earth am I going to do with you?"

"I suppose you will lodge a charge with the captain against me," she replied in even tones.

"Why not? You deserve it, don't you? You and your humorous friend with the yellow beard?"

She looked at him with a vague smile.

"What can you prove?" said she.

"Perfectly true, dear child. Nothing. I don't want to prove anything, either."

She smiled incredulously.

"It's quite true, Scheherazade. Otherwise, I shouldn't have ordered my steward to throw the remains of my dinner out of the corridor porthole. No, dear child. I should have had it analysed, had your stateroom searched for more of that elusive seasoning you used to flavour my dinner; had a further search made for a certain sort of handkerchief and perfume. Also, just imagine the delightful evidence which a thorough search of your papers might reveal!" He laughed. "No, Scheherazade; I did not care to prove you anything resembling a menace to society. Because, in the first place, I am absurdly grateful to you."

Her face became expressionless under the slow flush mounting.

"I'm not teasing you," he insisted. "What I say is true. I'm grateful to you for violently injecting romance into my perfectly commonplace existence. You have taken the book of my life and not only extra illustrated it with vivid and chromatic pictures, but you have unbound it, sewed into its prosaic pages several chapters ripped bodily from a penny-dreadful, and you have then rebound the whole thing and pasted your own pretty picture on the cover! Come, now! Ought

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not a man to be grateful to any philanthropic girl who so gratuitously obliges him?"

Her face burned under his ridicule; her clasped hands in her lap were twisted tight as though to maintain her self-control.

"What do you want of me?" she asked between lips that scarcely moved.

He laughed, sat up, stretched out both arms with a sigh of satisfaction. The colour came back to his face; he dropped one leg over the bed's edge; and she stood erect and stepped aside for him to rise.

No dizziness remained; he tried both feet on the floor, straightened himself, cast a gaily malicious glance at her, and slowly rose to his feet.

"Scheherazade," he said, "*isn't* it funny? I ask you, did you ever hear of a would-be murderess and her escaped victim being on such cordial terms? Did you?"

He was going through a few calisthenics, gingerly but with increasing abandon, while he spoke.

"I feel fine, thank you. I am enjoying the situation extremely, too. It's a delightful paradox, this situation. It's absurd, it's enchanting, it's incredible! There is only one more thing that could make it perfectly impossible. And I'm going to do it!" And he deliberately encircled her waist and kissed her.

She turned white at that, and, as he released her, laughing, took a step or two blindly, toward the door; stood there with one hand against it as though supporting herself.

After a few moments, and very slowly, she turned and looked at him; and that young man was scared for the first time since their encounter in the locked house in Brookhollow.

Yet in her face there was no anger, no menace, noth-

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ing he had ever before seen in any woman's face, nothing that he now comprehended. Only, for the moment, it seemed to him that something terrible was gazing at him out of this girl's fixed eyes—something that he did not recognise as part of her—another being hidden within her, staring out through her eyes at him.

"For heaven's sake, Scheherazade——" he faltered.

She opened the door, still watching him over her shoulder, shrank through it, and was gone.

He stood for a full five minutes as though stupefied, then walked to the door and flung it open. And met a ship's officer face to face, already lifting his hand to knock for admittance.

"Mr. Neeland?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Captain West's compliments, and he would be glad to see you in his cabin."

"Thank you. My compliments and thanks to Captain West, and I shall call on him immediately."

They exchanged bows; the officer turned, hesitated, glanced at the steward who stood by the port.

"Did you bring a radio message to Mr. Neeland?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, I received the message," said Neeland.

"The captain requests you to bring the message with you."

"With pleasure," said Neeland.

So the officer went away down the corridor, and Neeland sat down on his bed, opened the box, went over carefully every item of its contents, relocked it with a grin of satisfaction, and, taking it with him, went off to pay a visit to the captain of the *Volhymia*.

The bearded gentleman in the stateroom across the

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passage had been listening intently to the conversation, with his ear flat against his keyhole.

And now, without hesitating, he went to a satchel which stood on the sofa in his stateroom, opened it, took from it a large bundle of papers and a ten-pound iron scale-weight.

Attaching the weight to the papers by means of a heavy strand of copper wire, he mounted the sofa and hurled the weighted package into the Atlantic Ocean.

"Pig-dogs of British," he muttered in his golden beard, "you may go and dive for them when The Day dawns."

Then he filled and lighted a handsome porcelain pipe, and puffed it with stolid satisfaction, leaving the pepper-box silver cover open.

"*Der Tag*," he muttered in his golden beard; and his clear eyes swept the starlit ocean with the pensive and terrifying scrutiny of a waiting eagle.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE CAPTAIN OF THE VOLHYNIA

THE captain of the *Volhynia* had just come from the bridge and was taking a bite of late supper in his cabin when the orderly announced Neeland. He rose at once, offering a friendly hand:

"Mr. Neeland, I am very glad to see you. I know you by name and reputation already. There were some excellent pictures by you in the latest number of the *Midweek Magazine*."

"I'm so glad you liked them, Captain West."

"Yes, I did. There was a breeze in them—a gaiety. And such a fetching girl you drew for your heroine!"

"You think so! It's rather interesting. I met a young girl once—she comes from up-state where I come from. There was a peculiar and rather subtle attraction about her face. So I altered the features of the study I was making from my model, and put in hers as I remembered them."

"She must be beautiful, Mr. Neeland."

"It hadn't struck me so until I drew her from memory. And there's more to the story. I never met her but twice in my life—the second time under exceedingly dramatic circumstances. And now I'm crossing the Atlantic at a day's notice to oblige her. It's an amusing story, isn't it?"

"Mr. Neeland, I think it is going to be what you call a 'continued' story."

"No. Oh, no. It ought to be, considering its de-

## *THE CAPTAIN OF THE VOLHYNIA*

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ments. But it isn't. There's no further romance in it, Captain West."

The captain's smile was pleasant but sceptical.

They seated themselves, Neeland declining an invitation to supper, and the captain asking his indulgence if he talked while eating.

"Mr. Neeland," he said, "I'm about to talk rather frankly with you. I have had several messages by wireless today from British sources, concerning you."

Neeland, surprised, said nothing. Captain West finished his bite of supper; the steward removed the dishes and went out, closing the door. The captain glanced at the box which Neeland had set on the floor by his chair.

"May I ask," he said, "why you brought your suitcase with you?"

"It's valuable."

The captain's keen eyes were on his.

"Why are you followed by spies?" he asked.

Neeland reddened.

"Yes," continued the captain of the *Volhynia*, "my Government instructs me, by wireless, to offer you any aid and protection you may desire. I am informed that you carry papers of military importance to a certain foreign nation with which neither England nor France are on what might be called cordial terms. I am told it is likely that agents of this foreign country have followed you aboard my ship for the purpose of robbing you of these papers. Now, Mr. Neeland, what do you know about this business?"

"Very little," said Neeland.

"Have you had any trouble?"

"Oh, yes."

The captain smiled:

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"Evidently you have wriggled out of it," he said.

"Yes, wriggled is the literal word."

"Then you do not think that you require any protection from me?"

"Perhaps I do. I've been a singularly innocent and lucky ass. It's merely chance that my papers have not been stolen, even before I started in quest of them."

"Have you been troubled aboard my ship?"

Neeland waved his hand carelessly:

"Nothing to speak of, thank you."

"If you have any charge to make——"

"Oh, no."

The captain regarded him intently:

"Let me tell you something," he said. "Since we sailed, have you noticed the bulletins posted containing our wireless news?"

"Yes, I've read them."

"Did they interest you?"

"Yes. You mean that row between Austria and Serbia over the Archduke's murder?"

"I mean exactly that, Mr. Neeland. And now I am going to tell you something else. Tonight I had a radio message which I shall not post on the bulletins for various reasons. But I shall tell you under the seal of confidence."

"I give you my word of honour," said Neeland quietly.

"I accept it, Mr. Neeland. And this is what has happened: Austria has decided on an ultimatum to Serbia. And probably will send it."

They remained silent for a moment, then the captain continued:

"Why should we deceive ourselves? This is the most serious thing that has happened since the Hohenzollern

## *THE CAPTAIN OF THE VOLHYNIA*

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incident which brought on the Franco-Prussian War."

Neeland nodded.

"You see?" insisted the captain. "Suppose the humiliation is too severe for Servia to endure? Suppose she refuses the Austrian terms? Suppose Austria mobilises against her? What remains for Russia to do except to mobilise? And, if Russia does that, what is going to happen in Germany? And then, instantly and automatically, what will follow in France?" His mouth tightened grimly. "England," he said, "is the ally of France. Ask yourself, Mr. Neeland, what are the prospects of this deadly combination and deadlier situation."

After a few moments the young man looked up from his brown study:

"I'd like to ask you a question—perhaps not germane to the subject. May I?"

"Ask it."

"Then, of what interest are Turkish forts to any of the various allied nations—to the Triple Entente or the Triple Alliance?"

"Turkish fortifications?"

"Yes—plans for them."

The captain glanced instinctively at the box beside Neeland's chair, but his features remained incurious.

"Turkey is supposed to be the ally of Germany," he said.

"I've heard so. I know that the Turkish army is under German officers. But—if war should happen, is it likely that this ramshackle nation which was fought to a standstill by the Balkan Alliance only a few months ago would be likely to take active sides?"

"Mr. Neeland, it is not only likely, it is absolutely certain."



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"You believe Germany would count on her?"

"There is not a doubt of it. Enver Pasha holds the country in his right hand; Enver Pasha is the Kaiser's jackal."

"But Turkey is a beaten, discredited nation. She has no modern guns. Her fleet is rusting in the Bosphorus."

"The Dardanelles bristle with Krupp cannon, Mr. Neeland, manned by German gunners. Von der Goltz Pasha has made of a brave people a splendid army. As for ships, the ironclads and gunboats off Seraglio Point are rusting at anchor, as you say; but there are today enough German and Austrian armored ships within running distance of the Dardanelles to make for Turkey a powerful defensive squadron. Didn't you know any of these facts?"

"No."

"Well, they *are* facts. . . . You see, Mr. Neeland, we English sailors of the merchant marine are also part of the naval reserve. And we are supposed to know these things."

Neeland was silent.

"Mr. Neeland," he said, "in case of war between the various powers of Europe as aligned today, where do you imagine your sympathy would lie—and the sympathies of America?"

"Both with France and England," said Neeland bluntly.

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do—unless they are the aggressors."

The captain nodded:

"I feel rather that way myself. I feel very sure of the friendliness of your country. Because of course we—France and England—never would dream of attack-

## ***THE CAPTAIN OF THE VOLHYNIA***

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ing the Central Powers unless first assailed." He smiled, nodded toward the box on the floor: "Don't you think, Mr. Neeland, that it might be safer to entrust those—that box, I mean—to the captain of the Royal Mail steamer, *Volhynia*?"

"Yes, I do," said Neeland quietly.

"And—about these spies. Do you happen to entertain any particular suspicions concerning any of the passengers on my ship?" urged the captain.

"Indeed, I entertain lively suspicions, and even a few certainties," replied the young fellow, laughing.

"You appear to enjoy the affair?"

"I do. I've never had such a good time. I'm not going to spoil it by suggesting that you lock up anybody, either."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," said the captain seriously.

"But I do. They're friends of mine. They've given me the time of my life. A dirty trick I'd be serving myself as well as them if I came to you and preferred charges against them!"

The captain inspected him curiously for a few moments, then, in a soft voice:

"By any chance, Mr. Neeland, have you any Irish blood in your veins?"

"Yes, thank God!" returned the young fellow, unable to control his laughter. "And I'll bet there isn't a drop in you, Captain West."

"Not a drop, thank G—I'm sorry!—I ask your pardon, Mr. Neeland!" added the captain, very red in the face.

But Neeland laughed so hard that, after a moment, the red died out in the captain's face and a faint came into it.

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So they shook hands and said good night; and Neeland went away, leaving his box on the floor of the captain's cabin as certain of its inviolability as he was of the Bank of England.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE DROP OF IRISH

THE usual signs of land greeted Neeland when he rose early next morning and went out on deck for the first time without his olive-wood box—first a few gulls, then puffins, terns, and other sea fowl in increasing numbers, weed floating, fishing smacks, trawlers tossing on the rougher coast waters.

After breakfast he noticed two British torpedo boat destroyers, one to starboard, the other on the port bow, apparently keeping pace with the *Volhynia*. They were still there at noon, subjects of speculation among the passengers; and at tea-time their number was increased to five, the three new destroyers appearing suddenly out of nowhere, dead ahead, dashing forward through a lively sea under a swirling vortex of gulls.

The curiosity of the passengers, always easily aroused, became more thoroughly stirred up by the bulletins posted late that afternoon, indicating that the tension between the several European chancelleries was becoming acute, and that emperors and kings were exchanging personal telegrams.

There was all sorts of talk on deck and at the dinner table, wild talk, speculative talk, imaginative discussions, logical and illogical. But, boiled down to its basic ingredients, the wildest imagination on board the *Volhynia* admitted war to be an impossibility of modern times, and that, ultimately, diplomacy would

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settle what certainly appeared to be the ugliest international situation in a hundred years.

At the bottom of his heart Neeland believed this, too; wished for it when his higher and more educated spiritual self was flatly interrogated; and yet, in the everyday, impulsive ego of James Neeland, the drop of Irish had begun to sing and seethe with the atavistic instinct for a row.

War? He didn't know what it meant, of course. It made good poetry and interesting fiction; it rendered history amusing; made dry facts succulent.

Preparations for war in Europe, which had been going on for fifty years, were most valuable, too, in contributing the brilliant hues of uniforms to an otherwise sombre civilian world, and investing commonplace and sober cities with the omnipresent looming mystery of fortifications.

To a painter, war seemed to be a dramatic and gorgeous affair; to a young man it appealed as all excitement appeals. The sportsman in him desired to witness a scrap; his artist's imagination was aroused; the gambler in him speculated as to the outcome of such a war. And the seething, surging drop of Irish fixed and purred and coaxed for a chance to edge sideways into any fight which God in His mercy might provide for a decent gossoon who had never yet had the pleasure of a broken head.

"Not," thought Neeland to himself, "that I'll go trailing my coat tails. I'll go about my own business, of course—but somebody may hit me a crack at that!"

He thought of Ilse Dumont and of the man with the golden beard, realising that he had had a wonderful time, after all; sorry in his heart that it was all over

## THE DROP OF IRISH

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and that the *Volhynia* was due to let go her mudhooks in the Mersey about three o'clock the next morning.

As he leaned on the deck rail in the soft July darkness, he could see the lights of the destroyers to port and starboard, see strings of jewel-like signals flash, twinkle, fade, and flash again.

All around him along the deck passengers were promenading, girls in evening gowns or in summer white; men in evening dress or reefed in blue as nautically as possible; old ladies toddling, swathed in veils, old gentlemen in dinner coats and sporting headgear—every weird or conventional combination infested the decks of the *Volhynia*.

Now, for the first time during the voyage, Neeland felt free to lounge about where he listed, saunter wherever the whim of the moment directed his casual steps. The safety of the olive-wood box was no longer on his mind, the handle no longer in his physical clutch. He was at liberty to stroll as carelessly as any boulevard *flâneur*; and he did so, scanning the passing throng for a glimpse of Ilse Dumont or of the golden-bearded one, but not seeing either of them.

In fact, he had not laid eyes on them since he had supped not wisely but too well on the soup that Scheherazade had flavoured for him.

The stateroom door of the golden-bearded man had remained closed. His own little cockney steward, who also looked out for Golden Beard, reported that gentleman as requiring five meals a day, with beer in proportion, and the porcelain pipe steaming like *Ætna* all day long.

His little West Indian stewardess also reported the gossip from her friend on another corridor, which was in effect, that Miss White, the trained nurse, took

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meals in her room and had not been observed to leave that somewhat monotonous sanctuary.

How many more of the band there might be Neeland did not know. He remembered vaguely, while lying rigid under the grip of the drug, that he had heard Ilse Dumont's voice mention somebody called Karl. And he had an idea that this Karl might easily be the big, ham-fisted German who had tried so earnestly to stifle him and throw him from the vestibule of the midnight express.

However, it did not matter now. The box was safe in the captain's care; the *Volhynia* would be lying at anchor off Liverpool before daylight; the whole exciting and romantic business was ended.

With an unconscious sigh, not entirely of relief, Neeland opened his cigarette case, found it empty, turned and went slowly below with the idea of refilling it.

They were dancing somewhere on deck; the music of the ship's orchestra came to his ears. He paused a moment on the next deck to lean on the rail in the darkness and listen.

Far beneath him, through a sea as black as onyx, swept the reflections of the lighted ports; and he could hear the faint hiss of foam from the curling flow below.

As he turned to resume his quest for cigarettes, he was startled to see directly in front of him the heavy figure of a man—so close to him, in fact, that Neeland instinctively threw up his arm, elbow out, to avoid contact.

But the man, halting, merely lifted his hat, saying that in the dim light he had mistaken Neeland for a friend; and they passed each other on the almost de-

## THE DROP OF IRISH

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serted deck, saluting formally in the European fashion, with lifted hats.

His spirits a trifle subdued, but still tingling with the shock of discovering a stranger so close behind him where he had stood leaning over the ship's rail, Neeland continued on his way below.

Probably the big man had made a mistake in good faith; but the man certainly had approached very silently; was almost at his very elbow when discovered. And Neeland remembered the light-shot depths over which, at that moment, he had been leaning; and he realised that it would have been very easy for a man as big as that to have flung him overboard before he had wit to realise what had been done to him.

Neither could he forget the curious gleam in the stranger's eyes when a ray from a deck light fell across his shadowy face—unusually small eyes set a little too close together to inspire confidence. Nor had the man's slight accent escaped him—not a Teutonic accent, he thought, but something fuller and softer—something that originated east of Scutari, suggesting the Eurasian, perhaps.

But Neeland's soberness was of volatile quality; before he arrived at his stateroom he had recovered his gaiety of spirit. He glanced ironically at the closed door of Golden Beard as he fitted his key into his own door.

"A lively lot," he thought to himself, "what with Scheherazade, Golden Beard, and now Ali Baba—by jinx!—he certainly did have an Oriental voice!—and he looked the part, too, with a beak for a nose and a black moustache à la Enver Pasha!"

Much diverted by his own waxing imagination, he



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turned on the light in his stateroom, filled the cigarette case, turned to go out, and saw on the carpet just inside his door a bit of white paper folded cocked-hat fashion and addressed to him.

Picking it up and unfolding it, he read:

May I see you this evening at eleven? My stateroom is 623. If there is anybody in the corridor, knock; if not, come in without knocking.

I mean no harm to you. I give my word of honour. Please accept it for as much as your personal courage makes it worth to you—its face value, or nothing.

Knowing you, I may say without flattery that I expect you. If I am disappointed, I still must bear witness to your courage and to a generosity not characteristic of your sex.

You have had both power and provocation to make my voyage on this ship embarrassing. You have not done so. And self-restraint in a man is a very deadly weapon to use on a woman.

I hope you will come. I desire to be generous on my part. Ask yourself whether you are able to believe this. You don't know women, Mr. Neeland. Your conclusion probably will be a wrong one.

But I think you'll come, all the same. And you will be right in coming, whatever you believe.

ILSE DUMONT.

It was a foregone conclusion that he would go. He knew it before he had read half the note. And when he finished it he was certain.

Amused, his curiosity excited, grateful that the adventure had not yet entirely ended, he lighted a cigarette and looked impatiently at his watch.

It lacked half an hour of the appointed time and his exhilaration was steadily increasing.

He stuck the note into the frame of his mirror over the washstand with a vague idea that if anything hap-

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pened to him this would furnish a clue to his whereabouts.

Then he thought of the steward, but, although he had no reason to believe the girl who had written him, something within him made him ashamed to notify the steward as to where he was going. He ought to have done it; common prudence born of experience with Ilse Dumont suggested it. And yet he could not bring himself to do it; and exactly why, he did not understand.

One thing, however, he could do; and he did. He wrote a note to Captain West giving the Paris address of the Princess Mistchenka, and asked that the olive-wood box be delivered to her in case any accident befell him. This note he dropped into the mailbox at the end of the main corridor as he went out. A few minutes later he stood in an empty passageway outside a door numbered 623. He had a loaded automatic in his breast pocket, a cigarette between his fingers, and, on his agreeable features, a smile of anticipation—a smile in which amusement, incredulity, reckless humour, and a spice of malice were blended—the smile born of the drop of Irish sparkling like champagne in his singing veins.

And he turned the knob of door No. 623 and went in.

She was reading, curled up on her sofa under the electric bulb, a cigarette in one hand, a box of bonbons beside her.

She looked up leisurely as he entered, gave him a friendly nod, and, when he held out his hand, placed her own in it. With delighted gravity he bent and saluted her finger tips with lips that twitched to control a smile.

“Will you be seated, please?” she said gently.

The softness of her agreeable voice struck him

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he looked around for a seat, then directly at her; and saw that she meant him to find a seat on the lounge beside her.

"Now, indeed you are Scheherazade of the Thousand and One Nights," he said gaily, "with your cigarette and your bonbons, and cross-legged on your divan——"

"Did Scheherazade smoke cigarettes, Mr. Neeland?"

"No," he admitted; "that is an anachronism, I suppose. Tell me, how are you, dear lady?"

"Thank you, quite well."

"And—busy?" His lips struggled again to maintain their gravity.

"Yes, I have been busy."

"Cooking something up?—I mean soup, of course," he added.

She forced a smile, but reddened as though it were difficult for her to accustom herself to his half jesting sarcasms.

"So you've been busy," he resumed tormentingly, "but not with cooking lessons! Perhaps you've been practising with your pretty little pistol. You know you really need a bit of small arms practice, Scheherazade."

"Because I once missed you?" she inquired serenely.

"Why so you did, didn't you?" he exclaimed, delighted to goad her into replying.

"Yes," she said, "I missed you. I needn't have. I am really a dead shot, Mr. Neeland."

"Oh, Scheherazade!" he protested.

She shrugged:

"I am not bragging; I could have killed you. I supposed it was necessary only to frighten you. It was my mistake and a bad one."

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"My dear child," he expostulated, "you meant murder and you know it. Do you suppose I believe that you know how to shoot?"

"But I do, Mr. Neeland," she returned with good-humoured indifference. "My father was head *jäger* to Count Geier von Sturmspitz, and I was already a dead shot with a rifle when we emigrated to Canada. And when he became an Athabasca trader, and I was only twelve years old, I could set a moose-hide shoe-lace swinging and cut it in two with a revolver at thirty yards. And I can drive a shingle nail at that distance and drive the bullet that drove it, and the next and the next, until my revolver is empty. You don't believe me, do you?"

"You know that the beautiful Scheherazade——"

"Was famous for her fantastic stories? Yes, I know that, Mr. Neeland. I'm sorry you don't believe I fired only to frighten you."

"I'm sorry I don't," he admitted, laughing, "but I'll practise trying, and maybe I shall attain perfect credulity some day. Tell me," he added, "what *have* you been doing to amuse yourself?"

"I've been amusing myself by wondering whether you would come here to see me tonight."

"But your note said you were sure I'd come."

"You *have* come, haven't you?"

"Yes, Scheherazade, I'm here at your bidding, spirit and flesh. But I forgot to bring one thing."

"What?"

"The box which—you have promised yourself."

"Yes, the captain has it, I believe," she returned serenely.

"Oh, Lord! Have you even found out *that*? I don't know whether I'm much flattered by this surveillance

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you and your friends maintain over me. I suppose you even know what I had for dinner. Do you?"

"Yes."

"Come, I'll call that bluff, dear lady! What did I have?"

When she told him, carelessly, and without humour, mentioning accurately every detail of his dinner, he lost his gaiety of countenance a little.

"Oh, I say, you know," he protested, "that's going it a trifle too strong. Now, why the devil should your people keep tabs on me to that extent?"

She looked up directly into his eyes:

"Mr. Neeland, I want to tell you why. I asked you here so that I may tell you. The people associated with me are absolutely pledged that neither the French nor the British Government shall have access to the contents of your box. That is why nothing that you do escapes our scrutiny. We are determined to have the papers in that box, and we shall have them."

"You have come to that determination too late," he began; but she stopped him with a slight gesture of protest:

"Please don't interrupt me, Mr. Neeland."

"I won't; go on, dear lady!"

"Then, I'm trying to tell you all I may. I am trying to tell you enough of the truth to make you reflect very seriously.

"This is no ordinary private matter, no vulgar attempt at robbery and crime as you think—or pretend to think—for you are very intelligent, Mr. Neeland, and you know that the contrary is true.

"This affair concerns the secret police, the embassies, the chancelleries, the rulers themselves of nations long

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since grouped into two formidable alliances radically hostile to one another.

"I don't think you have understood—perhaps even yet you do not understand why the papers you carry are so important to certain governments—why it is impossible that you be permitted to deliver them to the Princess Mistchenka——"

"Where did *you* ever hear of *her!*" he demanded in astonishment.

The girl smiled:

"Dear Mr. Neeland, I know the Princess Mistchenka better, perhaps, than you do."

"Do you?"

"Indeed I do. What do you know about her? Nothing at all except that she is handsome, attractive, cultivated, amusing, and apparently wealthy.

"You know her as a traveller, a patroness of music and the fine arts—as a devotee of literature, as a graceful hostess, and an amiable friend who gives promising young artists letters of introduction to publishers who are in a position to offer them employment."

That this girl should know so much about the Princess Mistchenka and about his own relations with her amazed Neeland. He did not pretend to account for it; he did not try; he sat silent, serious, and surprised, looking into the pretty and almost smiling face of a girl who apparently had been responsible for three separate attempts to kill him—perhaps even a fourth attempt; and who now sat beside him talking in a soft and agreeable voice about matters concerning which he had never dreamed she had heard.

For a few moments she sat silent, observing in his changing expression the effects of what she had said to him. Then, with a smile:

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"Ask me whatever questions you desire to ask, Mr. Neeland. I shall do my best to answer them."

"Very well," he said bluntly; "how do you happen to know so much about me?"

"I know something about the friends of the Princess Mistchenka. I have to."

"Did you know who I was there in the house at Brookhollow?"

"No."

"When, then?"

"When you yourself told me your name, I recognised it."

"I surprised you by interrupting you in Brookhollow?"

"Yes."

"You expected no interruption?"

"None."

"How did you happen to go there? Where did you ever hear of the olive-wood box?"

"I had advices by cable from abroad—directions to go to Brookhollow and secure the box."

"Then somebody must be watching the Princess Mistchenka."

"Of course," she said simply.

"Why 'of course'?"

"Mr. Neeland, the Princess Mistchenka and her youthful *protégée*, Miss Carew——"

"What!!!"

The girl smiled wearily:

"Really," she said, "you are such a boy to be mixed in with matters of this colour. I think that's the reason you have defeated us—the trained fencer dreads a left-handed novice more than any classic master of the foils."

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“And that is what you have done to us—blundered—if you’ll forgive me—into momentary victory.

“But such victories are only momentary, Mr. Neeland. Please believe it. Please try to understand, too, that this is no battle with masks and plastrons and nicely padded buttons. No; it is no comedy, but a grave and serious affair that must inevitably end in tragedy—for somebody.”

“For me?” he asked without smiling.

She turned on him abruptly and laid one hand lightly on his arm with a pretty gesture, at once warning, appealing, and protective.

“I asked you to come here,” she said, “because—because I want you to escape the tragedy.”

“You want *me* to escape?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“I—am sorry for you.”

He said nothing.

“And—I like you, Mr. Neeland.”

The avowal in the soft, prettily modulated voice, lost none of its charm and surprise because the voice was a trifle tremulous, and the girl’s face was tinted with a delicate colour.

“I like to believe what you say, Scheherazade,” he said pleasantly. “Somehow or other I never did think you hated me personally—except once——”

She flushed, and he was silent, remembering her humiliation in the Brookhollow house.

“I don’t know,” she said in a colder tone, “why I should feel at all friendly toward you, Mr. Neeland, except that you are personally courageous, and you have shown yourself generous under a severe temptation to be otherwise.



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"As for—any personal humiliation—inflicted upon me——" She looked down thoughtfully and pretended to sort out a bonbon to her taste, while the hot colour cooled in her cheeks.

"I know," he said, "I've also jeered at you, jested, nagged you, taunted you, kiss——" He checked himself and he smiled and ostentatiously lighted a cigarette.

"Well," he said, blowing a cloud of aromatic smoke toward the ceiling, "I believe that this is as strange a week as any man ever lived. It's like a story book—like one of your wonderful stories, Scheherazade. It doesn't seem real, now that it is ended——"

"*It is not ended,*" she interrupted in a low voice.

He smiled.

"You know," he said, "there's no use trying to frighten such an idiot as I am."

She lifted her troubled eyes:

"That is what frightens *me*," she said. "I am afraid you don't know enough to be afraid."

He laughed.

"But I want you to be afraid. A really brave man knows what fear is. I want *you* to know."

"What do you wish me to do, Scheherazade?"

"Keep away from that box."

"I can't do that."

"Yes, you can. You can leave it in charge of the captain of this ship and let him see that an attempt is made to deliver it to the Princess Mistchenka."

She was in deadly earnest; he saw that. And, in spite of himself, a slight thrill that was almost a chill passed over him, checked instantly by the hot wave of sheer exhilaration at the hint of actual danger.

"Oho!" he said gaily. "Then you and your friends are not yet finished with me?"

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"Yes, if you will consider your mission accomplished."

"And leave the rest to the captain of the *Volhynia*?"

"Yes."

"Scheherazade," he said, "did you suppose me to be a coward?"

"No. You have done all that you can. A reserve officer of the British Navy has the box in his charge. Let him, protected by his Government, send it toward its destination."

In her even voice the implied menace was the more sinister for her calmness.

He looked at her, perplexed, and shook his head.

"I ask you," she went on, "to keep out of this affair—to disassociate yourself from it. I ask it because you have been considerate and brave, and because I do not wish you harm."

He turned toward her, leaning a little forward on the lounge:

"No use," he said, smiling. "I'm in it until it ends——"

"Let it end then!" said a soft, thick voice directly behind him. And Neeland turned and found the man he had seen on deck standing beside him. One of his fat white hands held an automatic pistol, covering him; the other was carefully closing the door which he had noiselessly opened to admit him.

"Karl!" exclaimed Ilse Dumont.

"It is safaire that you do not stir, either, to interfere," he said, squinting for a second at her out of his eyes set too near together.

"Karl!" she cried. "I asked him to come in order to persuade him! I gave him my word of honour!"

"Did you do so? Then all the bettaire. I think we

## ***THE DARK STAR***

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shall persuade him. Do not venture to move, young man; I shoot verree willingly."

And Neeland, looking at him along the blunt barrel of the automatic pistol, was inclined to believe him.

His sensations were not agreeable; he managed to maintain a calm exterior; choke back the hot chagrin that reddened his face to the temples; and cast a half humorous, half contemptuous glance at Ilse Dumont.

"You prove true, don't you?" he said coolly.  
"—True to your trade of story-telling, Scheherazade?"

"I knew—nothing—of this!" she stammered.

But Neeland only laughed disagreeably.

Then the door opened again softly, and Golden Beard came in without his crutches.

## CHAPTER XXI

### METHOD AND FORESIGHT

WITHOUT a word—with merely a careless glance at Neeland, who remained seated under the level threat of Ali Baba's pistol, the big, handsome German removed his overcoat. Under it was another coat. He threw this off in a brisk, businesslike manner, unbuckled a brace of pistols, laid them aside, unwound from his body a long silk rope ladder which dropped to the floor at Ilse Dumont's feet.

The girl had turned very pale. She stooped, picked up the silk ladder, and, holding it in both hands, looked hard at Golden Beard.

"Johann," she said, "I gave my word of honour to this young man that if he came here no harm would happen to him."

"I read the note you have shoved under his door," said Golden Beard. "That iss why we are here, Karl and I."

Neeland remembered the wax in the keyhole then. He turned his eyes on Ilse Dumont, curiously, less certain of her treachery now.

Meanwhile, Golden Beard continued busily unwinding things from his apparently too stout person, and presently disengaged three life-belts.

One of these he adjusted to his own person, then, putting on his voluminous overcoat, took the pistol from Ali Baba, who, in turn, adjusted one of the remaining life-belts to his body.

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Neeland, deeply perplexed and uncomfortable, watched these operations in silence, trying to divine some reason for them.

"Now, then!" said Golden Beard to the girl; and his voice sounded cold and incisive in the silence.

"This is not the way to do it," she said in a low tone. "I gave him my word of honour."

"You will be good enough to buckle on that belt," returned Golden Beard, staring at her.

Slowly she bent over, picked up the life-belt, and, looping the silk rope over her arm, began to put on the belt. Golden Beard, impatient, presently came to her assistance; then he unhooked from the wall a cloak and threw it over her shoulders.

"Now, Karl!" he said. "Shoot him dead if he stirs!" And he snatched a sheet from the bed, tore it into strips, walked over to Neeland, and deftly tied him hand and foot and gagged him.

Then Golden Beard and Ali Baba, between them, lifted the young man and seated him on the iron bed and tied him fast to it.

"Go out on deck!" said Golden Beard to Ilse Dumont.

"Let me stay——"

"No! You have acted like a fool. Go to the lower deck where is our accustomed rendezvous."

"I wish to remain, Johann. I shall not interfere——"

"Go to the lower deck, I tell you, and be ready to tie that rope ladder!"

Ali Baba, down on his knees, had pulled out a steamer trunk from under the bed, opened it, and was lifting out three big steel cylinders.

These he laid on the bed in a row beside the tied man; and Golden Beard, still facing Ilse Dumont, turned his head to look.

## METHOD AND FORESIGHT

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The instant his head was turned the girl snatched a pistol from the brace of weapons on the washstand and thrust it under her cloak. Neither Golden Beard nor Ali Baba noticed the incident; the latter was busy connecting the three cylinders with coils of wire; the former, deeply interested, followed the operation for a moment or two, then walking over to the trunk, he lifted from it a curious little clock with two dials and set it on the railed shelf of glass above the washstand.

“Karl, haf you ship’s time?”

Ali Baba paused to fish out his watch, and the two compared timepieces. Then Golden Beard wound the clock, set the hands of one dial at the time indicated by their watches; set the hands of the other dial at 2:13; and Ali Baba, carrying a reel of copper wire from the bed to the washstand, fastened one end of it to the mechanism of the clock.

Golden Beard turned sharply on Ilse Dumont:

“I said go on deck! Did you not understand?”

The girl replied steadily:

“I understood that we had abandoned this idea for a better one.”

“There iss no better one!”

“There *is*! Of what advantage would it be to blow up the captain’s cabin and the bridge when it is not certain that the papers will be destroyed?”

“Listen once!” returned Golden Beard, wagging his finger in her face:

“Cabin and bridge are directly above us and there remains not a splinter large like a pin! I know. I know my bombs! I know——”

The soft voice of Ali Baba interrupted, and his shallow, lightish eyes peered around at them:

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“Eet ees verree excellent plan, Johann. We do not require these papers; eet ees to destroy them we are mooch anxious”—he bent a deathly stare on Neeland—“and this yoong gentleman who may again annoy us.” He nodded confidently to himself and continued to connect the wires. “Yes, yes,” he murmured absently, “eet ees verree good plan—verree good plan to blow him into leetle pieces so beeg as a pin.”

“It is a clumsy plan!” said the girl, desperately. “There is no need for wanton killing like this, when we can——”

“Killing?” repeated Golden Beard. “That makes nothing. This English captain he iss of the naval reserve. *Und* this young man”—nodding coolly toward Neeland—“knows too much already. That iss not wanton killing. *Also!* You talk too much. Do you hear? We are due to drop anchor about 2:30. God knows there will be enough rushing to and fro at 2:15.

“Go on deck, I say, and fasten that rope ladder! Weishelm’s fishing smack will be watching; *und* if we do not swim for it we are caught on board! *Und* that iss the end of it all for us!”

“Johann,” she began tremulously, “listen to me——”

“*Nein! Nein!* What for a *Frauensimmer* haff we here!” retorted Golden Beard, losing his patience and catching her by the arm. “Go out und fix for us our ladder und keep it coiled on the rail und lean ofer it like you was looking at those stars once!”

He forced her toward the door; she turned, struggling, to confront him:

“Then for God’s sake, give this man a chance! Don’t leave him tied here to be blown to atoms! Give him a chance—anything except this! Throw him out of the port, there!” She pointed at the closed port, evaded

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Golden Beard, sprang upon the sofa, unscrewed the glass cover, and swung it open.

The port was too small even to admit the passage of her own body; she realised it; Golden Beard laughed and turned to examine the result of Ali Baba's wiring.

For a second the girl gazed wildly around her, as though seeking some help in her terrible dilemma, then she snatched up a bit of the torn sheeting, tied it to the screw of the porthole cover, and flung the end out where it fluttered in the darkness.

As she sprang to the floor Golden Beard swung round in renewed anger at her for still loitering.

"Sacreminton!" he exclaimed. "It is time you do your part! Go to your post then! We remain here until five minutes is left us. Then we join you."

The girl nodded, turned to the door.

"Wait! You understand the plan?"

"Yes."

"You understand that you do not go overboard until we arrive, no matter what happens?"

"Yes."

He stood looking at her for a moment, then with a shrug he went over and patted her shoulder.

"That's my brave girl! I also do not desire to kill anybody. But when the Fatherland is in danger, then killing signifies nothing—is of no consequence—pouf!—no lives are of importance then—not even our own!" He laughed in a fashion almost kindly and clapped her lightly once more on her shoulder: "Go, my child. The Fatherland is in danger!"

She went, not looking back. He closed and locked the door behind her and calmly turned to aid Ali Baba who was still fussing with the wires. Presently, however, he mounted the bed where Neeland sat tied and



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gagged; pulled from his pockets an auger with its bit, a screw-eye, and block and tackle; and, standing on the bed, began to bore a hole in the ceiling.

In a few moments he had fastened the screw-eye, rigged his block, made a sling for his bombs out of a blanket, and had hoisted the three cylinders up flat against the ceiling from whence the connecting wires sagged over the foot of the bedstead to the alarm clock on the washstand.

To give the clock more room on the glass shelf, Ali Baba removed the toilet accessories and set them on the washstand; but he had no room for a large jug of water, and, casting about for a place to set it, noticed a railed bracket over the head of the bed, and placed it there.

Then, apparently satisfied with his labours, he sat down Turk fashion on the sofa, lighted a cigarette, selected a bonbon from the box beside him, and calmly regaled himself.

Presently Golden Beard tied the cord which held up the sling in which the bombs were slung against the ceiling. He fastened it tightly to the iron frame of the bed, stepped back to view the effect, then leisurely pulled out and filled his porcelain pipe, and seated himself on the sofa beside Ali Baba.

Neither spoke; twice Golden Beard drew his watch from his waistcoat pocket and compared it carefully with the dial of the alarm clock on the washstand shelf. The third time he did this he tapped Ali Baba on the shoulder, rose, knocked out his pipe and flung it out of the open port.

Together they walked over to Neeland, examined the gag and ligatures as impersonally as though the prisoner were not there, nodded their satisfaction,

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turned off the electric light, and, letting themselves out, locked the door on the outside.

It lacked five minutes of the time indicated on the alarm dial.

## CHAPTER XXII

### TWO THIRTEEN

To Neeland, the entire affair had seemed as though it were some rather obvious screen-picture at which he was looking—some photo-play too crudely staged, and in which he himself was no more concerned than any casual spectator.

Until now, Neeland had not been scared; Ali Baba and his automatic pistol were only part of this unreality; his appearance on the scene had been fantastically classical; he entered when his cue was given by Scheherazade—this oily, hawk-nosed Eurasian with his pale eyes set too closely and his moustache hiding under his nose à la Enver Pasha—a faultless make-up, an entry properly timed and prepared. And then, always well-timed for dramatic effect, Golden Beard had appeared. Everything was *en règle*, every unity nicely preserved. Scheherazade had protested; and her protest sounded genuine. Also entirely convincing was the binding and gagging of himself at the point of an automatic pistol; and, as for the rest of the business, it was practically all action and little dialogue—an achievement really in these days of dissertation.

All, as he looked on at it over the bandage which closed his mouth, had seemed unreal, impersonal, even when his forced attitude had caused him inconvenience and finally pain.

But now, with the light extinguished and the closing of the door behind Golden Beard and Ali Baba, he ex-

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perienced a shock which began to awaken him to the almost incredible and instant reality of things.

It actually began to look as though these story-book conspirators—these hirelings of a foreign government who had not been convincing because they were too obvious, too well done—actually intended to expose him to serious injury.

In spite of their sinister intentions in regard to him, in spite of their attempts to harm him, he had not, so far, been able to take them seriously or even to reconcile them and their behaviour with the common-places of the twentieth century in which he lived.

But now, in the darkness, with the clock on the washstand shelf ticking steadily, he began to take the matter very seriously. The gag in his mouth hurt him cruelly; the bands of linen that held it in began to stifle him so that his breath came in quick gasps through his nostrils; sweat started at the roots of his hair; his heart leaped, beat madly, stood still, and leaped again; and he threw himself against the strips that held him and twisted and writhed with all his strength.

Suddenly fear pierced him like a poignard; for a moment panic seized him and chaos reigned in his bursting brain. He swayed and strained convulsively; he strove to hurl all the inward and inert reserve of strength against the bonds that held him.

After what seemed an age of terrible effort he found himself breathing fast and heavily as though his lungs would burst through his straining, dilating nostrils, seated exactly as he had been without a band loosened, and the icy sweat pouring over his twitching face.

He heard himself trying to shout—heard the imprisoned groan shattered in his own throat, dying there within him.

## *THE DARK STAR*

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Suddenly a key rattled; the door was torn open; the light switched on. Golden Beard stood there, his blue eyes glaring furious inquiry. He gave one glance around the room, caught sight of the clock, recoiled, shut off the light again, and slammed and locked the door.

But in that instant Neeland's starting eyes had seen the clock. The fixed hands on one of the dials still pointed to 2:13; the moving hands on the other lacked three minutes of that hour.

And, seated there in the pitch darkness, he suddenly realised that he had only three minutes more of life on earth.

All panic was gone; his mind was quite clear. He heard every tick of the clock and knew what each one meant.

Also he heard a sudden sound across the room, as though outside the port something was rustling against the ship's side.

Suddenly there came a click and the room sprang into full light; an arm, entering the open port from the darkness outside, let go the electric button, was withdrawn, only to reappear immediately clutching an automatic pistol. And the next instant the arm and the head of Ilse Dumont were thrust through the port into the room.

Her face was pale as death as her eyes fell on the dial of the clock. With a gasp she stretched out her arm and fired straight at the clock, shattering both dials and knocking the timepiece into the washbasin below.

For a moment she struggled to force her other shoulder and her body through the port, but it was too narrow. Then she called across to the bound figure

## TWO THIRTEEN

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seated on the bed and staring at her with eyes that fairly started from their sockets:

“Mr. Neeland, can’t you move? Try! Try to break loose——”

Her voice died away in a whisper as a flash of bluish flame broke out close to the ceiling overhead, where the three bombs were slung.

“Oh, God!” she faltered. “The fuses are afire!”

For an instant her brain reeled; she instinctively recoiled as though to fling herself out into the darkness. Then, in a second, her extended arm grew rigid, slanted upward; the pistol exploded once, twice, the third time; the lighted bombs in their sling, released by the severed rope, fell to the bed, the fuses sputtering and fizzling.

Instantly the girl fired again at the big jug of water on the bracket over the head of the bed; a deluge drenched the bed underneath; two fuses were out; one still snapped and glimmered and sent up little jets and rings of vapour; but as the water soaked into the match the cinder slowly died until the last spark fell from the charred wet end and went out on the drenched blanket.

She waited a little longer, then with an indescribable look at the helpless man below, she withdrew her head, pushed herself free, hung to the invisible rope ladder for a moment, swaying against the open port. His eyes were fastened on her where she dangled there against the darkness betwixt sky and sea, oscillating with the movement of the ship, her pendant figure now gilded by the light from the room, now phantom dim as she swung outward.

As the roll of the ship brought her head to the level of the port once more, she held up her pistol, shook it, and laughed at him:

## *THE DARK STAR*

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"Now do you believe that I can shoot?" she called out. "Answer me some time when that mocking tongue of yours is free!"

Then, climbing slowly upward into darkness, the light, falling now across her body, now athwart her skirt, gilded at last the heels of her shoes; suddenly she was gone; then stars glittered through the meshes of the shadowy, twitching ladder which still barred the open port. And finally the ladder was pulled upward out of sight.

He waited. After a little while—an interminable interval to him—he heard somebody stealthily trying the handle of the door; then came a pause, silence, followed by a metallic noise as though the lock were being explored or picked.

For a while the scraping, metallic sounds continued steadily, then abruptly ceased as though the unseen meddler had been interrupted.

A voice—evidently the voice of the lock-picker—pitched to a cautious key, was heard in protest as though objecting to some intentions evident in the new arrival. Whispered expostulations continued for a while, then the voices became quarrelsome and louder; and somebody suddenly rapped on the door.

Then a thick, soft voice that he recognised with a chill, grew angrily audible:

"I say to you, steward, that I forbid you to entaire that room. I forbid you to disturb thees yoong lady. Do you know who I am?"

"I don't care who you are——"

"I have authority. I shall employ it. You shall lose your berth! Thees yoong lady within thees room ees my fiancée! I forbid you to enter forcibly——"

"Haven't I knocked? Wot's spilin' you? I am do-

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ing my duty. Back away from this 'ere door, I tell you!"

"You spik thees-a-way, so impolite——"

"Get out o' my way! Blime d'you think I'll stand 'ere jawin' any longer?"

"I am membaire of Parliament——"

And the defiant voice of Jim's own little cockney steward retorted, interrupting:

"Ahr, stow it! Don't I tell you as how a lydy tele-phones me just now that my young gentleman is in there? Get away from that door, you blighter, or I'll bash your beak in!"

The door trembled under a sudden and terrific kick; the wordy quarrel ceased; hurried steps retreated along the corridor; a pass key rattled in the lock, and the door was flung wide open:

"Mr. Neeland, sir—oh, my Gawd, wot ever 'ave they gone and done, sir, to find you 'ere in such a 'orrid state!"

But the little cockney lost no time; fingers and pen-knife flew; Neeland, his arms free, tore the bandage from his mouth and spat out the wad of cloth.

"I'll do the rest," he gasped, forcing the words from his bruised and distorted lips; "follow that man who was outside talking to you! Find him if you can. He had been planning to blow up this ship!"

"*That* man, sir!"

"Yes! Did you know him?"

"Yes, sir; but I darsn't let on to him I knew him—what with 'earing that you was in here——"

"You *did* know him?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who is he?"

"Mr. Neeland, sir, that there cove is wot he 's



## THE DARK STAR

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he is, a member of Parliament, and his name is Wilson——”

“You’re mad! He’s an Eurasian, a spy; his name is Karl Breslau—I heard it from the others—and he tried to blow up the captain’s cabin and the bridge with those three bombs lying there on the bed!”

“My God, sir—what you tell me may be so, but what I say is true, sir; that gentleman you heard talking outside the door to me is Charles Wilson, member of Parliament, representing Glebe and Wotherness; and I knew it w’en I ’anded ’im the ’ot stuff!—’strewth I did, sir—and took my chance you’d ’elp me out if I got in too rotten with the company!”

Neeland said:

“Certainly you may count on me. You’re a brick!” He continued to rub and slap and pinch his arms and legs to restore the circulation, and finally ventured to rise to his shaky feet. The steward offered an arm; together they hobbled to the door, summoned another steward, placed him in charge of the room, and went on in quest of Captain West, to whom an immediate report was now imperative.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ON HIS WAY

THE sun hung well above the river mists and threw long, cherry-red beams across the choppy channel where clotted jets of steam and smoke from tug and steamer drifted with the fog; and still the captain of the *Volhynia* and young Neeland sat together in low-voiced conference in the captain's cabin; and a sailor, armed with cutlass and pistol, stood outside the locked and bolted door.

Off the port bow, Liverpool spread as far as the eye could see through the shredded fog; to starboard, off Birkenhead, through a haze of pearl and lavender, the tall phantom of an old-time battleship loomed. She was probably one of Nelson's ships, now only an apparition; but to Neeland, as he caught sight of her dimly revealed, still dominating the water, the old ship seemed like a menacing ghost, never to be laid until the sceptre of sea power fell from an enervated empire and the glory of Great Britain departed for all time. And in his Yankee heart he hoped devoutly that such disaster to the world might never come upon it.

Few passengers were yet astir; the tender had not yet come alongside; the monstrous city beyond had not awakened.

But a boat manned by Liverpool police lay off the *Volhynia's* port; Neeland's steamer trunk was already in it; and now the captain accompanied him to the ladder, where a sailor took his suitcase and the olive-

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wood box and ran down the landing stairs like a monkey.

“Good luck,” said the captain of the *Volhynia*. “And keep it in your mind every minute that those two men and that woman probably are at this moment aboard some German fishing craft, and headed for France.

“Remember, too, that they are merely units in a vast system; that they are certain to communicate with other units; that between you and Paris are people who will be notified to watch for you, follow you, rob you.”

Neeland nodded thoughtfully.

The captain said again:

“Good luck! I wish you were free to turn over that box to us. But if you’ve given your word to deliver it in person, the whole matter involves, naturally, a point of honour.”

“Yes. I have no discretion in the matter, you see.” He laughed. “You’re thinking, Captain West, that I haven’t much discretion anyway.”

“I don’t think you have very much,” admitted the captain, smiling and shaking the hand which Neeland offered. “Well, this is merely one symptom of a very serious business, Mr. Neeland. That an attempt should actually have been made to murder you and to blow me to pieces in my cabin is a slight indication of what a cataclysmic explosion may shatter the peace of the entire world at any moment now. . . . Good-bye. And I warn you very solemnly to take this affair as a deadly serious one and not as a lark.”

They exchanged a firm clasp; then Neeland descended and entered the boat; the Inspector of Police took the tiller; the policemen bent to the oars, and the boat shot away through a mist which was turning to a golden vapour.

## ON HIS WAY

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It was within a few boat-lengths of the landing stairs that Neeland, turning for a last look into the steaming golden glory behind him, saw the most splendid sight of his life. And that sight was the British Empire assuming sovereignty.

For there, before his eyes, militant, magnificent, the British fleet was taking the sea, gliding out to accept its fealty, moving majestically in mass after mass of steel under flowing torrents of smoke, with the phantom battle flags whipping aloft in the blinding smother of mist and sun and the fawning cut-water hurrying too, as though even every littlest wave were mobilised and hastening seaward in the service of its mistress, Ruler of all Waters, untroubled by a man-made Kiel.

And now there was no more time to be lost; no more stops until he arrived in Paris. A taxicab rushed him and his luggage across the almost empty city; a train, hours earlier than the regular steamer train, carried him to London where, as he drove through the crowded, sunlit streets, in a hansom cab, he could see news-venders holding up strips of paper on which was printed in great, black letters:

### **THE BRITISH FLEET SAILS SPY IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS**

**CHARLES WILSON, M.P., ACCUSED**

**MISSING MEMBER SUPPOSED TO BE KARL BRESLAU,  
INTERNATIONAL SPY**

And he noticed knots of people pausing to buy the latest editions of the papers offered.

But Neeland had no time to see much more of London than that—glimpses of stately grey build ings and

## ***THE DARK STAR***

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green trees; of monuments and palaces where soldiers in red tunics stood guard; the crush of traffic in the city; trim, efficient police, their helmets strapped to their heads, disentangling the streams of vehicles, halting, directing everything with calm and undisturbed precision; a squadron of cavalry in brilliant uniforms leisurely emerging from some park between iron railings under stately trees; then the crowded confusion of a railroad station, but not the usual incidents of booking and departure, because he was to travel by a fast goods train under telegraphed authority of the British Government.

And that is about all that Neeland saw of the mightiest city in the world on the eve of the greatest conflict among the human races that the earth has ever witnessed, or ever shall, D. V.

The flying goods train that took him to the Channel port whence a freight packet was departing, offered him the luxury of a leather padded armchair in a sealed and grated mail van.

Nobody disturbed him; nobody questioned him; the train officials were civil and incurious, and went calmly about their business with all the traditional stolidity of official John Bull.

Neeland had plenty of leisure to think as he sat there in his heavy chair which vibrated but did not sway very much; and his mind was fully occupied with his reflections, for, so far, he had not had time to catalogue, index, and arrange them in proper order, so rapid and so startling had been the sequence of events since he had left his studio in New York for Paris, via Brookhollow, London, and other points east.

One thing in particular continued to perplex and astonish him: the identity of a member of Parliament,

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known as Charles Wilson, suddenly revealed as Karl Breslau, an international spy.

The wildest flight of fancy of an irresponsible novelist had never created such a character in penny-dreadful fiction. It remained incomprehensible, almost incredible to Neeland that such a thing could be true.

Also, the young man had plenty of food for reflection, if not for luncheon, in trying to imagine exactly how Golden Beard and Ali Baba, and that strange, illogical young girl, Ilse Dumont, had escaped from the *Volhynia*.

Probably, in the darkness, the fishing boat which they expected had signalled in some way or other. No doubt the precious trio had taken to the water in their life-jackets and had been picked up even before armed sailors on the *Volhynia* descended to their empty state-rooms and took possession of what luggage could be discovered, and of the three bombs with their charred wicks still soaking on the sopping bed.

And now the affair had finally ended, Neeland believed, in spite of Captain West's warnings. For how could three industrious conspirators in a fishing smack off the Lizard do him any further damage?

If they had managed to relay information concerning him to their friends ashore by some set of preconcerted signals, possibly the regular steamer train to and out of London might be watched.

Thinking of this, it presently occurred to Neeland that friends in France, also, might be stirred up in time to offer him their marked attentions. This, no doubt, was what Captain West meant; and Neeland considered the possibility as the flying train whirled him toward the Channel.

He asked if he might smoke, and was informed

## THE DARK STAR

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he might; and he lighted a cigarette and stretched out on his chair, a little hungry from lack of luncheon, a trifle tired from lack of sleep, but, in virtue of his vigorous and youthful years, comfortable, contented, and happy.

Never, he admitted, had he had such a good time in all his life, despite the fact that chance alone, and not his own skill and alertness and perspicacity, had saved his neck.

No, he could not congratulate himself on his cleverness and wisdom; sheer accident had saved his skin—and once the complex and unaccountable vagary of a feminine mind had saved him from annihilation so utter that it slightly sickened him to remember his position in Ilse Dumont's stateroom as she lifted her pistol and coolly made good her boast as a dead-shot. But he forced himself to take it lightly.

"Good Lord!" he thought to himself. "Was ever a man in such a hellish position, except in melodrama? And *what* a movie that would have made! And *what* a shot that girl proved herself to be! Certainly she could have killed me there at Brookhollow! She could have riddled me before I ducked, even with that nickel-plated affair about which I was ass enough to taunt her!"

Lying in his chair, cheek on arm, he continued to ponder on what had happened, until the monotonous vibration no longer interfered with his inclination for a nap. On the contrary, the slight, rhythmic jolting soothed him and gradually induced slumber; and he slept there on the rushing train, his feet crossed and resting on the olive-wood box.

A hand on his arm aroused him; the sea wind blowing

## ON HIS WAY

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through the open doors of the mail-van dashed in his face like a splash of cool water as he sat up and looked around him.

As he descended from the van an officer of the freight packet greeted him by name; a sailor piled his luggage on a barrow; and Neeland walked through the vista of covered docks to the pier.

There was a lively wind whipping that notoriously bad-mannered streak of water known as the English Channel. Possibly, had it been christened the French Channel its manners might have been more polite. But there was now nothing visible about it to justify its sentimental pseudonym of Silver Streak.

It was a dirty colour, ominous of ill-temper beyond the great breakwater to the northward; and it fretted and fumed inshore and made white and ghastly faces from the open sea.

But Neeland, dining from a tray in a portholed pit consecrated to the use of a casual supercargo, rejoiced because he adored the sea, inland lubber that he had been born and where the tides of fate had stranded him. For, to a New Yorker, the sea seems far away—as far as it seems to the Parisian. And only when chance business takes him to the Battery does a New Yorker realise the nearness of the ocean to that vast volume of ceaseless dissonance called New York.

Neeland ate cold meat and bread and cheese, and washed it down with bitters.

He was nearly asleep on his sofa when the packet cast off.

He was sound asleep when, somewhere in the raging darkness of the Channel, he was hurled from the sofa against the bunk opposite—into which he



## *THE DARK STAR*

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ently crawled and lay, still half asleep, mechanically rubbing a maltreated shin.

Twice more the bad-mannered British Channel was violently rude to him; each time he crawled back to stick like a limpet in the depths of his bunk.

Except when the Channel was too discourteous, he slept as a sea bird sleeps afloat, tossing outside thundering combers which batter basalt rocks.

Even in his deep, refreshing sea sleep, the subtle sense of exhilaration—of well-being—which contact with the sea always brought to him, possessed him. And, deep within him, the drop of Irish seethed and purred as a kettle purrs through the watches of the night over a banked but steady fire.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE ROAD TO PARIS

OVER the drenched sea wall gulls whirled and eddied above the spouting spray; the grey breakwater was smothered under exploding combers; *quai*, docks, white-washed lighthouse, swept with spindrift, appeared and disappeared through the stormy obscurity as the tender from the Channel packet fought its way shoreward with Neeland's luggage lashed in the cabin, and Neeland himself sticking to the deck like a fly to a frantic mustang, enchanted with the whole business.

For the sea, at last, was satisfying this young man; he savoured now what he had longed for as a little boy, guiding a home-made raft on the waters of Neeland's mill pond in the teeth of a summer breeze. Before he had ever seen the ocean he wanted all it had to give short of shipwreck and early decease. He had experienced it on the Channel during the night.

There was only one other passenger aboard—a tall, lean, immaculately dressed man with a ghastly pallor, a fox face, and ratty eyes, who looked like an American and who had been dreadfully sick. Not caring for his appearance, Neeland did not speak to him. Besides, he was having too good a time to pay attention to anybody or anything except the sea.

A sailor had lent Neeland some oilskins and a sou'wester; and he hated to put them off—hated the calmer waters inside the basin where the tender now lay r

## THE DARK STAR

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ing; longed for the gale and the heavy seas again, sorry the crossing was ended.

He cast a last glance of regret at the white fury raging beyond the breakwater as he disembarked among a crowd of porters, *gendarmes*, soldiers, and assorted officials; then, following his porter to the customs, he prepared to submit to the unvarying indignities incident to luggage examination in France.

He had leisure, while awaiting his turn, to buy a novel, "Les Bizarettes," of Maurice Bertrand; time, also, to telegraph to the Princess Mistchenka. The fox-faced man, who looked like an American, was now speaking French like one to a perplexed official, inquiring where the Paris train was to be found. Neeland listened to the fluent information on his own account, then returned to the customs bench.

But the unusually minute search among his effects did not trouble him; the papers from the olive-wood box were buttoned in his breast pocket; and after a while the customs officials let him go to the train which stood beside an uncovered concrete platform beyond the *quai*, and toward which the fox-faced American had preceded him on legs that still wobbled with seasickness.

There were no Pullmans attached to the train, only the usual first, second, and third class carriages with compartments; and a new style corridor car with central aisle and lettered doors to compartments holding four.

Into one of these compartments Neeland stepped, hoping for seclusion, but backed out again, the place being full of artillery officers playing cards.

In vain he bribed the guard, who offered to do his best; but the human contents of a Channel passenger

## THE ROAD TO PARIS

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steamer had unwillingly spent the night in the quaint French port, and the Paris-bound train was already full.

The best Neeland could do was to find a seat in a compartment where he interrupted conversation between three men who turned sullen heads to look at him, resenting in silence the intrusion. One of them was the fox-faced man he had already noticed on the packet, tender, and customs dock.

But Neeland, whose sojourn in a raw and mannerless metropolis had not blotted out all memory of gentler cosmopolitan conventions, lifted his hat and smilingly excused his intrusion in the fluent and agreeable French of student days, before he noticed that he had to do with men of his own race.

None of the men returned his salute; one of them merely emitted an irritated grunt; and Neeland recognised that they all must be his own delightful countrymen—for even the British are more dignified in their stolidity.

A second glance satisfied him that all three were undoubtedly Americans; the cut of their straw hats and apparel distinguished them as such; the nameless grace of Mart, Haffner and Sharx marked the tailoring of the three; only Honest Werner could have manufactured such headgear; only New York such footwear.

And Neeland looked at them once more and understood that Broadway itself sat there in front of him, pasty, close-shaven, furtive, sullen-eyed, the *New York Paris Herald* in its seal-ringed fingers; its fancy waistcoat pockets bulging with cigars.

“Sports,” he thought to himself; and decided to maintain incognito and pass as a Frenchman, if ces-

## THE DARK STAR

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sary, to escape conversation with the three tired-eyed ones.

So he hung up his hat, opened his novel, and settled back to endure the trip through the rain, now beginning to fall from a low-sagging cloud of watery grey.

After a few minutes the train moved. Later the guard passed and accomplished his duties. Neeland inquired politely of him in French whether there was any political news, and the guard replied politely that he knew of none. But he looked very serious when he said it.

Half an hour from the coast the rain dwindled to a rainbow and ceased; and presently a hot sun was gilding wet green fields and hedges and glistening roofs which steamed vapour from every wet tile.

Without asking anybody's opinion, one of the men opposite raised the window. But Neeland did not object; the rain-washed air was deliciously fragrant; and he leaned his elbow on his chair arm and looked out across the loveliest land in Europe.

"Say, friend," said an East Side voice at his elbow, "does smoking go?"

He glanced back over his shoulder at the speaker—a little, pallid, sour-faced man with the features of a sick circus clown and eyes like two holes burnt in a lump of dough.

"*Pardon, monsieur?*" he said politely.

"Can't you even pick a Frenchman, Ben?" sneered one of the men opposite—a square, smoothly shaven man with slow, heavy-lidded eyes of a greenish tinge.

The fox-faced man said:

"He had me fooled, too, Eddie. If Ben Stull didn't get his number it don't surprise me , as he was

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on the damn boat I crossed in, and I certainly picked him for New York."

"Aw," said the pasty-faced little man referred to as Ben Stull, "Eddie knows it all. He never makes no breaks, of course. You make 'em, Doc, but he doesn't. That's why me and him and you is travelling here—this minute—because the great Eddie Brandes never makes no breaks——"

"Go on and smoke and shut up," said Brandes, with a slow, sidewise glance at Neeland, whose eyes remained fastened on the pages of "Les Bizarettes," but whose ears were now very wide open.

"Smoke," repeated Stull, "when this here Frenchman may make a holler?"

"Wait till I ask him," said the man addressed as Doc, with dignity. And to Neeland:

*"Pardong, musseer, permitty vous moi de fumy ung cigar?"*

*"Mais comment, donc, monsieur! Je vous en prie——"*

"He says politely," translated Doc, "that we can smoke and be dammed to us."

They lighted three obese cigars; Neeland, his eyes on his page, listened attentively and stole a glance at the man they called Brandes.

So this was the scoundrel who had attempted to deceive the young girl who had come to him that night in his studio, bewildered with what she believed to be her hopeless disgrace!

This was the man—this short, square, round-faced individual with his minutely shaven face and slow greenish eyes, and his hair combed back and still reeking with perfumed tonic—this shiny, scented, and overgroomed sport with rings on his fat, blunt fingers and the silk

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laces on his tan oxfords as fastidiously tied as though a valet had done it!

Ben Stull began to speak; and presently Neeland discovered that the fox-faced man's name was Doc Curfoot; that he had just arrived from London on receipt of a telegram from them; and that they themselves had landed the night before from a transatlantic liner to await him here.

Doc Curfoot checked the conversation, which was becoming general now, saying that they'd better be very sure that the man opposite understood no English before they became careless.

"*Musseer*," he added suavely to Neeland, who looked up with a polite smile, "*parly voo Anglay?*"

"*Je parle Français, monsieur.*"

"I get him," said Stull, sourly. "I knew it anyway. He's got the sissy manners of a Frenchy, even if he don't look the part. No white man tips his lid to nobody except a swell skirt."

"I seen two dudes do it to each other on Fifth Avenue," remarked Curfoot, and spat from the window.

Brandes, imperturbable, rolled his cigar into the corner of his mouth and screwed his greenish eyes to narrow slits.

"You got our wire, Doc?"

"Why am I here if I didn't!"

"Sure. Have an easy passage?"

Doc Curfoot's foxy visage still wore traces of the greenish pallor; he looked pityingly at Brandes—self-pityingly:

"Say, Eddie, that was the worst I ever seen. A freight boat, too. God! I was that sick I hoped she'd turn turtle! And nab it from me; if you hadn't wired

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me S O S, I'd have waited over for the steamer train and the regular boat!"

"Well, it's S O S all right, Doc. I got a cable from Quint this morning saying our place in Paris is ready, and we're to be there and open up tonight——"

"*What* place?" demanded Curfoot.

"Sure, I forgot. You don't know anything yet, do you?"

"Eddie," interrupted Stull, "let me do the talking *this* time, if *you* please."

And, to Curfoot:

"Listen, Doc. We was up against it. You heard. Every little thing has went wrong since Eddie done what he done—every damn thing! Look what's happened since Maxy Venem got sore and he and Minna started out to get him! Morris Stein takes away the Silhouette Theatre from us and we can't get no time for 'Lilith' on Broadway. We go on the road and bust. All our Saratoga winnings goes, also what we got invested with Parson Smawley when the bulls pulled Quint's——!"

"Ah, f'r the lov' o' Mike!" began Brandes. "Can that stuff!"

"All right, Eddie. I'm tellin' Doc, that's all. I ain't aiming to be no crape-hanger; I only want you both to listen to me *this* time. If *you'd* listened to me before, we'd have been in Saratoga today in our own machines. But no; you done what you done—God! Did anyone ever hear of such a thing!—taking chances with that little rube from Brookhollow—that freckled-faced mill-hand—that yap-skirt! And Minna and Max having you watched all the time! You big boob! No—don't interrupt! Listen to *me!* Where are you now? You had good money; you had a theaytre, you had backing!



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Quint was doing elegant; Doc and Parson and you and me had it all our way and comin' faster every day. Wait, I tell you! This ain't a autopsy. This is business. I'm tellin' you two guys all this becuz I want you to realise that what Eddie done was against my advice. Come on, now; wasn't it?"

"It sure was," admitted Curfoot, removing his cigar from his lean, pointed visage of a greyhound, and squinting thoughtfully at the smoke eddying in the draught from the open window.

"Am I right, Eddie?" demanded Stull, fixing his black, smeary eyes on Brandes.

"Well, go on," returned the latter between thin lips that scarcely moved.

"All right, then. Here's the situation, Doc. We're broke. If Quint hadn't staked us to this here new game we're playin', where'd we be, I ask you?"

"We got no income now. Quint's is shut up; Maxy Venem and Minna Minti fixed us at Saratoga so we can't go back there for a while. They won't let us touch a card on the liners. Every pug is leery of us since Eddie fimflammed that Battling Smoke; and I told you he'd holler, too! Didn't I?" turning on Brandes, who merely let his slow eyes rest on him without replying.

"Go on, Ben," said Curfoot.

"I'm going on. We guys gotta do something——"

"We ought to have fixed Max Venem," said Curfoot coolly.

There was a silence; all three men glanced stealthily at Neeland, who quietly turned the page of his book as though absorbed in his story.

"That squealer, Max," continued Curfoot with placid ferocity blazing in his eyes, "ought to have been put

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away. Quint and Parson wanted us to have it done. Was it any stunt to get that dirty little shyster in some roadhouse last May?"

Brandes said:

"I'm not mixing with any gunmen after the Rosenthal business."

"Becuz a lot of squealers done a amateur job like that, does it say that a honest job can't be pulled?" demanded Curfoot. "Did Quint and me ask you to go to Dopey or Clabber or Pete the Wop, or any of them cheap gangsters?"

"Ah, can the gun-stuff," said Brandes. "I'm not for it. It's punk."

"What's punk?"

"Gun-play."

"Didn't you pull a pop on Maxy Venem the night him and Hyman Adams and Minna beat you up in front of the Knickerbocker?"

"Eddie was stalling," interrupted Stull, as Brandes' face turned a dull beef-red. "You talk like a bad actor, Doc. There's other ways of getting Max in wrong. Guns ain't what they was once. Gun-play is old stuff. But listen, now. Quint has staked us and we gotta make good. And this is a big thing, though it looks like it was out of our line."

"Go on; what's the idea?" inquired Curfoot, interested.

Brandes, the dull red still staining his heavy face, watched the flying landscape from the open window.

Stull leaned forward; Curfoot bent his lean, narrow head nearer; Neeland, staring fixedly at his open book, pricked up his ears.

"Now," said Stull in a low voice, "I'll tell you guys all Eddie and I know about this here business of Cap-

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tain Quint's. It's like this, Doc: Some big feller comes to Quint after they close him up—he won't tell who—and puts up this here proposition: Quint is to open a elegant place in Paris on the Q. T. In fact, it's ready now. There'll be all the backing Quint needs. He's to send over three men he can trust—three men who can shoot at a pinch! He picks us three and stakes us. Get me?"

Doc nodded.

Brandes said in his narrow-eyed, sleepy way:

"There was a time when they called us gunmen—Ben and me. But, so help me God, Doc, we never did any work like that ourselves. We never fired a shot to croak any living guy. Did we, Ben?"

"All right," said Stull impatiently. And, to Curfoot: "Eddie and I know what we're to do. If it's on the cards that we shoot—well, then, we'll shoot. The place is to be small, select, private, and first class. Doc, you act as capper. You deal, too. Eddie sets 'em up. I deal or spin. All right. We three guys attend to anything American that blows our way. Get that?"

Curfoot nodded.

"Then for the foreigners, there's to be a guy called Karl Breslau."

Neeland managed to repress a start, but the blood tingled in his cheeks, and he turned his head a trifle as though seeking better light on the open pages in his hands.

"This here man Breslau," continued Stull, "speaks all kinds of languages. He is to have two friends with him, a fellow named Kestner and one called Weisahn. They trim the foreigners, they do; and——"

"Well, I don't see nothing new about this——" began Curfoot; but Stull interrupted:

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"Wait, can't you! This ain't the usual. We run a place for Quint. The place is like Quint's. We trim guys same as he does—or did. *But there's more to it.*"

He let his eyes rest on Neeland, obliquely, for a full minute. The others watched him, too. Presently the young man cut another page of his book with his pen-knife and turned it with eager impatience, as though the story absorbed him.

"Don't worry about Frenchy," murmured Brandes with a shrug. "Go ahead, Ben."

Stull laid one hand on Curfoot's shoulder, drawing that gentleman a trifle nearer and sinking his voice:

"Here's the new stuff, Doc," he said. "And it's brand new to us, too. There's big money into it. Quint swore we'd get ours. And as we was on our uppers we went in. It's like this: We lay for Americans from the Embassy or from any of the Consulates. They are our special game. It ain't so much that we trim them; we also get next to them; we make 'em talk right out in church. Any political dope they have we try to get. We get it any way we can. If they'll accelerate we accelerate 'em; if not, we dope 'em and take their papers. The main idee is to get a holt on 'em!

"That's what Quint wants; that's what he's payin' for and gettin' paid for—inside information from the Embassy and Consulates——"

"What does Quint want of that?" demanded Curfoot, astonished.

"How do I know? Blackmail? Graft? I can't call the dope. But listen here! Don't forget that it ain't Quint who wants it. It's the big feller behind him who's backin' him. It's some swell guy higher up who's payin' Quint. And Quint, he pays us. So where's the squeal coming?"

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"Yes, but——"

"Where's the holler?" insisted Stull.

"I ain't hollerin', am I? Only this here is new stuff to me——"

"Listen, Doc. I don't know what it is, but all these here European kings is settin' watchin' one another like toms in a back alley. I think that some foreign political high-upper wants dope on what our people are finding out over here. Like this, he says to himself: 'I hear this Kink is building ten sooper ferry boats. If that's right, I oughta know. And I hear that the Queen of Marmora has ordered a million new nifty fifty-shot bean-shooters for the boy scouts! That is indeed serious news!' So he goes to his broker, who goes to a big feller, who goes to Quint, who goes to us. Flag me?"

"Sure."

"That's all. There's nothing to it, Doc. Says Quint to us: 'Trim a few guys for me and get their letters,' says Quint; 'and there's somethin' in it for me and you! And *that's* the new stuff, Doc."

"You mean we're spies?"

"Spies? I don't know. We're on a salary. We get a big bonus for every letter we find on the carpet——" He winked at Curfoot and relighted his cigar.

"Say," said the latter, "it's like a creeping joint. It's a panel game, Ben——"

"It's politics like they play 'em in Albany, only it's ambassadors and kinks we trim, not corporations."

"*We* can't do it! What the hell do we know about kinks and attachés?"

"No; Weishelm, Breslau and Kestner do that. We lay for the attachés or spin or deal or act handy at the bar and buffet with homesick Americans. No; the fine

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work—the high-up stuff, is done by Breslau and Weishelm. And I guess there's some fancy skirts somewhere in the game. But they're silent partners; and anyway Weishelm manages that part."

Curfoot, one lank knee over the other, swung his foot thoughtfully to and fro, his ratty eyes lost in dreamy revery. Brandes tossed his half-consumed cigar out of the open window and set fire to another. Stull waited for Curfoot to make up his mind. After several minutes the latter looked up from his cunning abstraction:

"Well, Ben, put it any way you like, but we're just plain political spies. And what the hell do they hand us over here if we're pinched?"

"I don't know. What of it?"

"Nothing. If there's good money in it, I'll take a chance."

"There is. Quint backs us. When we get 'em coming——"

"Ah," said Doc with a wry face, "that's all right for the cards or the wheel. But this pocket picking——"

"Say; that ain't what I mean. It's like this: Young Fitznoodle of the Embassy staff gets soused and starts out lookin' for a quiet game. We furnish the game. We don't go through his pockets; we just pick up whatever falls out and take shorthand copies. Then back go the letters into Fitznoodle's pocket——"

"Yes. Who reads 'em first?"

"Breslau. Or some skirt, maybe."

"What's Breslau?"

"Search *me*. He's a Dutchman or a Rooshian or some sort of Dodo. What do you care?"

"I don't. All right, Ben. You've got to show me; that's all."

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"Show you what?"

"Spot cash!"

"You're in when you handle it?"

"If you show me real money—yes."

"You're on. I'll cash a cheque of Quint's for you at Monroe's soon as we hit the asphalt! And when you finish counting out your gold nickels put 'em in your pants and play the game! Is that right?"

"Yes."

They exchanged a wary handshake; then, one after another, they leaned back in their seats with the air of honest men who had done their day's work.

Curfoot blinked at Brandes, at his excessively groomed person, at his rings.

"You *look* prosperous, Eddie."

"It's his business to," remarked Stull.

Brandes yawned:

"It would be a raw deal if there's a war over here," he said listlessly.

"Ah," said Curfoot, "there won't be none."

"Why?"

"The Jews and bankers won't let these kinks mix it."

"That's right, too," nodded Brandes.

But Stull said nothing and his sour, pasty visage turned sourer. It was the one possibility that disturbed him—the only fly in the amber—the only mote that troubled his clairvoyance. Also, he was the only man among the three who didn't think a thing was certain to happen merely because he wanted it to happen.

There was another matter, too, which troubled him. Brandes was unreliable. And who but little Stull should know how unreliable?

For Brandes had always been that. And now Stull

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knew him to be more than that—knew him to be treacherous.

Whatever in Brandes had been decent, or had, blindly perhaps, aspired toward decency, was now in abeyance. Something within him had gone to smash since Minna Minti had struck him that night in the frightened presence of Rue Carew.

And from that night, when he had lost the only woman who had ever stirred in him the faintest aspiration to better things, the man had gradually changed. Whatever in his nature had been unreliable became treacherous; his stolidity became sullenness. A slow ferocity burned within him; embers of a rage which no brooding ever quenched slumbered red in his brain until his endless meditation became a monomania. And his monomania was the ruin of this woman who had taken from him in the very moment of consummation all that he had ever really loved in the world—a thin, awkward, freckled, red-haired country girl, in whom, for the first and only time in all his life, he saw the vague and phantom promise of that trinity which he had never known—a wife, a child, and a home.

He sat there by the car window glaring out of his dull green eyes at the pleasant countryside, his thin lips tightening and relaxing on his cigar.

Curfoot, still pondering over the “new stuff” offered him, brooded silently in his corner, watching the others out of his tiny, bright eyes.

“Do anything in London?” inquired Stull.

“No.”

“Who was you working for?”

“A jock and a swell skirt. But Scotland Yard got next and chased the main guy over the water.”

“What was your lay?”



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"Same thing. I dealt for the jock and the skirt trimmed the squabs."

"Anybody holler?"

"Aw—the kind we squeezed was too high up to holler. Them young lords take their medicine like they wanted it. They ain't like the home bunch that is named after swell hotels."

After a silence he looked up at Brandes:

"What ever become of Minna Minti?" he asked.

Brandes' heavy features remained stolid.

"She got her divorce, didn't she?" insisted Curfoot.

"Yes."

"Alimony?"

"No. She didn't ask any."

"How about Venem?"

Brandes remained silent, but Stull said:

"I guess she chucked him. She wouldn't stand for that snake. I got to hand it to her; she ain't that kind."

"What kind is she?"

"I tell you I got to hand it to her. I can't complain of her. She acted white all right until Venem stirred her up. Eddie's got himself to blame; he got in wrong and Venem had him followed and showed him up to Minna."

"You got tired of her, didn't you?" said Curfoot to Brandes. But Stull answered for him again:

"Like any man, Eddie needed a vacation now and then. But no skirt understands."

Brandes said slowly:

"I'll live to fix Minna yet."

"What fixed you," snapped Stull, "was that there Brookhollow stuff——"

"Can it!" retorted Brandes, turning a deep red.

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"Aw—don't hand me the true-love stuff, Eddie! If you'd meant it with that little haymaker you'd have respected her——"

Brandes' large face became crimson with rage:

"You say another word about her and I'll push your block off—you little dough-faced kike!"

Stull shrugged and presently whispered to Curfoot:

"That's the play he always makes. I've waited two years, but he won't ring down on the love stuff. I guess he was hit hard that trip. It took a little red-headed, freckled country girl to stop him. But it was comin' to Eddie Brandes, and it certainly looks like it was there to stay a while."

"He's still stuck on her?"

"I guess she's still the fly paper," nodded Stull.

Suddenly Brandes turned on Stull such a look of concentrated hatred that the little gambler's pallid features stiffened with surprise:

"Ben," said Brandes in a low voice, which was too indistinct for Neeland to catch, "I'll tell you something now that you don't know. I saw Quint alone; I talked with him. Do you know who is handling the big stuff in this deal?"

"Who?" asked Stull, amazed.

"The Turkish Embassy in Paris. And do you know who plays the fine Italian hand for that bunch of Turks?"

"No."

"Minna!"

"You're crazy!"

Brandes took no notice, but went on with a sort of hushed ferocity that silenced both Stull and Curfoot:

"That's why I went in. To get Minna. And I'll get her if it costs every cent I've got or ever hope to get.

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That's why I'm in this deal; that's why I came; that's why I'm here telling you this. I'm in it to get Minna, not for the money, not for anything in all God's world except to get the woman who has done what Minna did to me."

Neeland listened in vain to the murmuring voice; he could not catch a word.

Stull whispered:

"Aw, fr God's sake, Eddie, that ain't the game. Do you want to double-cross Quint?"

"I *have* double-crossed him."

"What! Do you mean to sell him out?"

"I *have* sold him out."

"Jesus! Who to?"

"To the British Secret Service. And there's to be one hundred thousand dollars in it, Doc, for you and me to divide. And fifty thousand more when we put the French bulls on to Minna and Breslau. Now, how does one hundred and fifty thousand dollars against five thousand apiece strike you two poor, cheap guys?"

But the magnitude of Brandes' treachery and the splendour of the deal left the two gamblers stunned.

Only by their expressions could Neeland judge that they were discussing matters of vital importance to themselves and probably to him. He listened; he could not hear what they were whispering. And only at intervals he dared glance over his book in their direction.

"Well," said Brandes under his breath, "go on. Spit it out. What's the squeal?"

"My God!" whispered Stull. "Quint will kill you."

Brandes laughed unpleasantly:

"Not me, Ben. I've got that geezer where I want him on a dirty deal he pulled off with the police."

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Curfoot turned his pointed muzzle toward the window and sneered at the sunny landscape.

A few minutes later, far across the rolling plain set with villas and farms, and green with hedgerows, gardens, bouquets of trees and cultivated fields, he caught sight of a fairy structure outlined against the sky.

Turning to Brandes:

“There’s the Eiffel Tower,” remarked Curfoot.  
“Where are we stopping, Eddie?”

“Caffy des Bulgars.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s where we go to work—Roo Vilna.”

Stull’s smile was ghastly, but Curfoot winked at Brandes.

Neeland listened, his eyes following the printed pages of his book.

## CHAPTER XXV

### CUP AND LIP

THROUGH the crowded Paris terminal Neeland pushed his way, carrying the olive-wood box in his hand and keeping an eye on his porter, who preceded him carrying the remainder of his luggage and repeating:

*"Place, s'il vous plaît, m'sieu', dames!"*

To Neeland it was like a homecoming after many years' exile; the subtle but perfectly specific odour of Paris assailed his nostrils once again; the rapid, emphatic, lively language of France sounded once more delightfully in his eager ears; vivacity and intelligence sparkled in every eye that met his own. It was a throng of rapid movement, of animated speech, of gesticulation. And, as it was in the beginning when he first arrived there as a student, he fell in love with it at first sight and contact.

All around him moved porters, passengers, railroad officials; the red *képis* of soldiers dotted the crowd; a priest or two in shovel hat and buckled shoes, a Sister of Charity from the Rue de Bac lent graver accents to the throng; and everywhere were the pretty bourgeois women of the capital gathered to welcome relatives or friends, or themselves starting on some brief summer voyage so dear to those who seldom find it in their hearts to leave Paris for longer than a fortnight at a time.

As he pressed onward he witnessed characteristic reunions between voyagers and friends who awaited them

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—animated, cordial, gay scenes complicated by many embraces on both cheeks.

And, of a sudden, he noticed the prettiest girl he had ever seen in his life. She was in white, with a black straw hat, and her face and figure were lovely beyond words. Evidently she was awaiting friends; there was a charming expectancy on her fresh young face, a slight forward inclination of her body, as though expectancy and happy impatience alone controlled her.

Her beauty almost took his breath away.

“Lord!” he thought to himself. “If such a girl as that ever stood waiting for me——”

At the same moment her golden-grey eyes, sweeping the passing crowd, met his; a sharp thrill of amazement passed through him as she held out both gloved hands with a soft exclamation of recognition:

“Jim! Jim Neeland!”

“Rue Carew!” He could scarcely credit his eyesight, where he stood, hat in hand, holding both her little hands in one of his.

No, there was no use in trying to disguise his astonishment. He looked into the face of this tall young girl, searched it for familiar features, recognised a lovely paraphrase of the freckled face and thin figure he remembered, and remained dumb before this radiant reincarnation of that other unhappy, shabby, and meagre child he had known two years ago.

Ruhannah, laughing and flushed, withdrew her hands.

“Have I changed? You haven’t. And I always thought you the most wonderful and ornamental young man on this planet. I knew you at once, Jim Neeland. Would you have passed without recognising me?”

“Perhaps I wouldn’t have passed after seeing you——”

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"Jim Neeland! What a remark!" She laughed. "Anyway, it's nice to believe myself attractive enough to be noticed. And I'm *so* glad to see you. Naïa is here, somewhere, watching for you"—turning her pretty, eager head to search for the Princess Mistchenka. "Oh, there she is! She doesn't see us—"

They made their way between the passing ranks of passengers and porters; the Princess caught sight of them, came hastily toward them.

"Jim! It's nice to see you. Thank you for coming! So *you* found him, Rue? How are you, Jim? And where is the olive-wood box?"

"I'm well, and there's that devilish box!" he replied, laughing and lifting it in his hand to exhibit it. "Naïa, the next time you want it, send an escort of artillery and two battleships!"

"Did you have trouble?"

"Trouble? I had the time of my life. No moving picture can ever again excite me; no best seller. I've been both since I had your cable to get this box and bring it to you."

He laughed as he spoke, but the Princess continued to regard him very seriously, and Rue Carew's smile came and waned like sunlight in a wood, for she was not quite sure whether he had really encountered any dangers on this mission which he had fulfilled so well.

"Our car is waiting outside," said the Princess. "Where is your porter, Jim?"

Neeland glanced about him, discovered the porter, made a sign for him to follow, and they moved together toward the entrance to the huge terminal.

"I haven't decided where to stop yet," began Neeland, but the Princess checked him with a pretty gesture:

"You stop with us, Jim."

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"Thank you so much, but——"

"Please. Must I beg of you?"

"Do you really wish it?"

"Certainly," she replied absently, glancing about her. She added: "I don't see my car. I don't see my footman. I told him to wait here. Rue, do you see him anywhere?"

"No, I don't," said the girl.

"How annoying!" said the Princess. "He's a new man. My own footman was set upon and almost killed by Apaches a week ago. So I had to find a substitute. How stupid of him! Where on earth can he be waiting?"

They traversed the court of the terminal. Many automobiles were parked there or just leaving; liveried footmen stood awaiting masters and mistresses; but nowhere was the car of the Princess Mistchenka in sight.

They stood there, Neeland's porter behind with his suitcase and luggage, not knowing whether to wait longer or summon a taxicab.

"I don't understand," repeated the Princess impatiently. "I explained very carefully what I desired. That new groom is stupid. Caron, my chauffeur, would never have made a mistake unless that idiot groom misunderstood his instructions."

"Let me go and make some inquiries," said Neeland. "Do you mind waiting here? I'll not be long——"

He went off, carrying the olive-wood box, which his grasp never quitted now; and presently the Princess and Ruhannah saw him disappear among the ranks of automobiles and cabs.

"I don't like it, Rue," repeated the Princess in a low voice. "I neither understand nor relish this situation."



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"Have you any idea——"

"Hush, child! I don't know. That new groom, Verdier, was recommended by the Russian Embassy. I don't know what to think of this."

"It *can't* be anything—queer, can it, dear?" asked Rue.

"Anything *can* have happened. Nothing is likely to have occurred, however—unless—unless those Apaches were——"

"Naïa!"

"It's possible, I suppose. They may have attacked Picard as part of a conspiracy. The Russian Embassy may have been deceived in Verdier. All this may be part of a plan. But—I scarcely believe it. . . . All the same, I dislike to take a taxicab——"

She caught sight of Neeland returning; both women moved forward to meet him.

"I've solved the mystery," he said. "Naïa, your car was run into outside the station a few minutes after you left it. And I'm sorry to say that your chauffeur was badly enough hurt to require an ambulance."

"Where on earth did you learn that?"

"The official at the taxicab control told me. I went to him because that is where one is likely to receive information."

"Caron hurt!" murmured the Princess. "What a shame! Where did they take him, Jim?"

"To the Charité."

"I'll go this afternoon. But where is that imbecile groom of mine?"

"It appears that he and a policeman went to a garage on the repair truck that took your car."

"Was he arrested?"

"I believe so."

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"What a *contretemps!*" exclaimed the Princess Mistchenka. "We shall have to take a taxicab after all!"

"I've ordered one from the control. There it comes now," said Neeland, as a brand new taxicab, which looked like a private car, drew up at the curb, and a smiling and very spick and span chauffeur saluted.

Neeland's porter hoisted trunk and suitcase on top; the Princess stepped into the limousine, followed by Rue and Neeland; the chauffeur took the order, started his car, wheeled out into the square, circled the traffic policeman, and whizzed away into the depths of the most beautiful city in the world.

Neeland, seated with his back to the driver, laid the olive-wood box on his knees, unlocked it, drew from his breast pocket the papers he carried; locked them in the box once more, and looked up laughingly at the Princess and Ruhannah as he placed it at his feet.

"There you are!" he said. "Thank heaven my task and your affair have been accomplished. All the papers are there—and," to Ruhannah, "that pretty gentleman you call the Yellow Devil is inside, along with some assorted firearms, drawing instruments, and photographs. The whole business is here, intact—and so am I—if that irrelevant detail should interest you."

Rue smiled her answer; the Princess scrutinised him keenly:

"Did you have trouble, Jim?"

"Yes, I did."

"Serious trouble?"

"I tell you it was like a movie in five reels. Never before did I believe such things happened outside a Yonkers studio. But they do, Naïa. And I've realised that the world is full of more excitingly melodramatic

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possibilities than any novel or scenario ever contained."

"You're not serious, of course," began Rue Carew, watching the varying expressions on his animated features; but the Princess Mistchenka said, unsmiling:

"A film melodrama is a crude and tawdry thing compared to the real drama so many of us play in every moment of our lives."

Neeland said to Rue, lightly:

"That is true as far as I have been concerned with that amazing box. It's full of the very devil—of that Yellow Devil! When I pick it up now I seem to feel a premonitory tingling all over me—not entirely disagreeable," he added to the Princess, "but the sort of half-scared exhilaration a man feels who takes a chance and is quite sure he'll not have another chance if he loses. Do you understand what I mean?"

"Yes," said the Princess unsmilingly, her clear, pleasant eyes fixed on him.

In her tranquil, indefinite expression there was something which made him wonder how many such chances this pretty woman had taken in her life of intellectual pleasure and bodily ease.

And now he remembered that Ilse Dumont apparently knew about her—about Ruhannah, too. And Ilse Dumont was the agent of a foreign government.

Was the Princess Mistchenka, patron and amateur of the arts, another such agent? If not, why had he taken this journey for her with this box of papers?

The passage of the Boulevard was slow; at every square traffic was halted; all Paris crowded the streets in the early afternoon sunshine, and the taxicab in which they sat made little speed until the Place de la Concorde opened out and the great Arc—a tiny phantom of lavender and pearl—spanned the vanishing

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point of a fairly perspective between parallel and endless ramparts of tender green.

"There was a lot of war talk on the *Volhynia*," said Neeland, "but I haven't heard any since I landed, nor have I seen a paper. I suppose the Chancelleries have come to some agreement."

"No," said the Princess.

"You don't expect trouble, do you? I mean a general European free-for-all fight?"

"I don't know, Jim."

"Haven't you," he asked blandly, "any means of acquiring inside information?"

She did not even pretend to evade the good-humoured malice of his smile and question:

"Yes; I have sources of private information. I have learned nothing, so far."

He looked at Rue, but the smile had faded from her face and she returned his questioning gaze gravely.

"There is great anxiety in Europe," she said in a low voice, "and the tension is increasing. When we arrive home we shall have a chance to converse more freely." She made the slightest gesture with her head toward the chauffeur—a silent reminder and a caution.

The Princess nodded slightly:

"One never knows," she remarked. "We shall have much to say to one another when we are safely home."

But Neeland could not take it very seriously here in the sunshine, with two pretty women facing him—here speeding up the Champs Elysées between the endless green of chestnut trees and the exquisite silvery-grey façades of the wealthy—with motors flashing by on every side and the cool, leafy alleys thronged with children and nurse-maids, and Monsieur Guignol squeaking and drumming in his red-curtained box!

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How could a young man believe in a sequel to the almost incredible melodrama in which he had figured, with such a sane and delightful setting, here in the familiar company of two charming women he had known?

Besides, all Paris and her police were at his elbow; the olive-wood box stood between his knees; a smartly respectable taxi and its driver drove them with the quiet *éclat* and precision of a private *employé*; the Arc de Triomphe already rose splendidly above them, and everything that had once been familiar and reassuring and delightful lay under his grateful eyes on every side.

And now the taxicab turned into the rue Soleil d'Or—a new street to Neeland, opened since his student days, and only one square long, with a fountain in the middle and young chestnut trees already thickly crowned with foliage lining both sides of the street.

But although the rue Soleil d'Or was a new street to him, Paris construction is also a rapid affair. The street was faced by charming private houses built of grey Caen stone; the fountain with its golden sundial, with the seated figure—a life-size replica of Manship's original in the Metropolitan Museum—serenely and beautifully holding its place between the Renaissance façades and rows of slender trees.

Summer had not yet burned foliage or flowers; the freshness of spring itself seemed still to reign there.

Three blue-bloused street-sweepers with hose and broom were washing the asphalt as their cab slowed down, sounding its horn to warn them out of the way. And, the spouting hose still in their hands, the street-cleaners stepped out of the gutter before the pretty private hôtel of Madame la Princesse.

Already a butler was opening the *grille*; already the

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cool half-light of the music-room, he could feel the hot blood of resentment and chagrin in his cheeks.

"Nobody could have foreseen it," repeated Rue Carrew in a pretty, bewildered voice. "And if the Princess Naia had no suspicions, how could I harbour any—or how could you?"

"I've been sufficiently tricked—or I thought I had been—to be on my guard. But it seems not. I ought never to have been caught in such a disgusting trap—such a simple, silly, idiotic cage! But—good Lord! How on earth was a man to suspect anything so—so naturally planned and executed—so simply done. It was an infernal masterpiece, Rue. But—that is no consolation to a man who has been made to appear like a monkey!"

The Princess, entering, overheard; and she seated herself and looked tranquilly at Neeland as he resumed his place on the sofa.

"You were not to blame, Jim," she said. "It was my fault. I had warning enough at the railroad terminal when an accident to my car was reported to me by the control through you." She added, calmly: "There was no accident."

"No accident?" exclaimed Neeland, astonished.

"None at all. My new footman, who followed us to the waiting salon for incoming trains, returned to my chauffeur, Caron, saying that he was to go back to the garage and await orders. I have just called the garage and I had Caron on the wire. There was no accident; he has not been injured; and—the new footman has disappeared!"

"It was a clear case of treachery?" exclaimed Neeland.

"Absolutely a plot. The pretended official

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terminal control was an accomplice of my footman, of the taxicab driver, of the pretended street-cleaners—and of whom else I can, perhaps, imagine.”

“Did you call the terminal control?”

“I did. The official in charge and the starter had seen no such accident; had given no such information. Some masquerader in uniform must have intercepted you, Jim.”

“I found him coming toward me on the sidewalk not far from the kiosque. He was in uniform; I never dreamed he was not the genuine thing.”

“There is no blame attached to you——”

“Naïa, it actually sickens me to discover how little sense I possess. I’ve been through enough to drive both suspicion and caution into this wooden head of mine——”

“What have you been through, Jim?” asked the Princess calmly.

“I’ll tell you. I didn’t play a brilliant rôle, I’m sorry to admit. Not common sense but sheer luck pulled me through as far as your own doorstep. And there,” he added disgustedly, “the gods no doubt grew tired of such an idiot, and they handed me what was coming to me.”

He was so thoroughly and so boyishly ashamed and angry with himself that a faint smile flitted over the Princess Naïa’s lips.

“Proceed, James,” she said.

“All right. Only first may I ask—who is Ilse Dumont?”

For a moment the Princess sat silent, expressionless, intent on the man whose clear, inquiring eyes still questioned her.

The Princess finally answered with a question:

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"Did *she* cause you any trouble, Jim?"

"Every bit I had was due to her. Also—and here's a paradox—I shouldn't be here now if Ilse Dumont had not played square with me. Who is she?"

The Princess Naïa did not reply immediately. Instead, she dropped one silken knee over the other, lighted a cigarette, and sat for a few moments gazing into space. Then:

"Ilse Dumont," she said, "is a talented and exceedingly pretty young woman who was born in Alsace of one German and one thoroughly Germanised parent.

"She played two seasons in Chicago in light opera under another name. She had much talent, an acceptable voice and she became a local favourite."

The Princess looked at her cigarette; continued speaking as though addressing it:

"She sang at the Opéra Comique here in Paris the year before last and last year. Her rôles were minor ones. Early this spring she abruptly broke her contract with the management and went to New York."

Neeland said bluntly:

"Ilse Dumont is an agent in the service of the Turkish Government."

The Princess nodded.

"Did you know it, Naïa?"

"I began to suspect it recently."

"May I ask how?"

The Princess glanced at Rue and smiled:

"Ruhannah's friend, Colonel Izzet Bey, was very devoted to Minna Minti——"

"To *whom!*" exclaimed Neeland, astounded.

"To Ilse Dumont. Minna Minti is her stage name," said the Princess.

Neeland turned and looked at Rue, who, conscious



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of his excitement, flushed brightly, yet never suspecting what he was about to say.

The Princess said quietly:

"Yes, tell her, Jim. It is better she should know. Until now it has not been necessary to mention the matter, or I should have done so."

Rue, surprised, still prettily flushed with expectancy, looked with new curiosity from one to the other.

Neeland said:

"Ilse Dumont, known on the stage as Minna Minti, is the divorced wife of Eddie Brandes."

At the mention of a name so long hidden away, buried in her memory, and almost forgotten, the girl quivered and straightened up, as though an electric shock had passed through her body.

Then a burning colour flooded her face as at the swift stroke of a lash, and her grey eyes glimmered with the starting tears.

"You'll have to know it, darling," said the Princess in a low voice. "There is no reason why you should not; it no longer can touch you. Don't you know that?"

"Y-yes——" Ruhannah's slowly drooping head was lifted again; held high; and the wet brilliancy slowly dried in her steady eyes.

"Before I tell you," continued Neeland, "what happened to me through Ilse Dumont, I must tell you what occurred in the train on my way to Paris. . . . May I have a cigarette, Princess Naïa?"

"At your elbow in that silver box."

Rue Carew lighted it for him with a smile, but her hand still trembled.

"First," he said, "tell me what particular significance those papers in the olive-wood box have. Then I can

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tell you more intelligently what happened to me since I went to Brookhollow to find them.”

“They are the German plans for the fortification of the mainland commanding the Dardanelles, and for the forts dominating the Gallipoli peninsula.”

“Yes, I know that. But of what interest to England or France or Russia——”

“If there is to be war, can't you understand the importance to us of those plans?” asked the Princess in a low, quiet voice.

“To—‘us’?” he repeated.

“Yes, to *us*. I am Russian, am I not?”

“Yes. I now understand how very Russian you are, Princess. But what has Turkey——”

“What *is* Turkey?”

“An empire——”

“No. A German province.”

“I did not know——”

“That is what the Ottoman Empire is today,” continued the Princess Mistchenka, “a Turkish province fortified by Berlin, governed from Berlin through a Germanised Turk, Enver Pasha; the army organised, drilled, equipped, officered, and paid by the Kaiser Wilhelm; every internal resource and revenue and development and projected development mortgaged to Germany and under German control; and the Sultan a nobody!”

“I did not know it,” repeated Neeland.

“It is the truth, *mon ami*. It is inevitable that Turkey fights if Germany goes to war. England, France, Russia know it. Ask yourself, then, how enormous to us the value of those plans—tentative, sketchy, perhaps, yet the inception and foundation of those German-made and German-armed fortifications which to

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line the Dardanelles and the adjacent waters within the sphere of Ottoman influence?"

"So *that* is why you wanted them," he said with an unhappy glance at Rue. "What idiotic impulse prompted me to put them back in the box I can't imagine. You saw me do it, there in the taxicab."

Ruhannah said:

"The chauffeur saw you, too. He was looking at you in his steering mirror; I saw his face. But it never entered my mind that anything except idle curiosity possessed him."

"Perhaps," said the Princess to Neeland, "what you did with the papers saved your life. Had that chauffeur not seen you place them in the box, he might have shot and robbed you as you left the cab, merely on the chance of your having them on your person."

There was a silence; then Neeland said:

"This is a fine business! As far as I can see murder seems to be the essence of the contract."

"It is often incidental to it," said the Princess Mistchenka serenely. "But you and Ruhannah will soon be out of this affair."

"I?" said the girl, surprised.

"I think so."

"Why, dear?"

"I think there is going to be war. And if there is, France will be concerned. And that means that you and Ruhannah, too, will have to leave France."

"But you?" asked the girl, anxiously.

"I expect to remain. How long can you stay here, Jim?"

Neeland cast an involuntary glance at Rue as he replied:

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"I intended to take the next steamer. Why? Can I be of any service to you, Princess Naïa?"

The Princess Mistchenka let her dark eyes rest on him for a second, then on Rue Carew.

"I was thinking," she said, "that you might take Ruhannah back with you if war is declared."

"Back to America?" exclaimed the girl. "But where am I to go in America? What am I to do there? I—I didn't think I was quite ready to earn my own living"—looking anxiously at the Princess Naïa—"do you think so, dear?"

The Princess said:

"I wanted you to remain. And you must not worry, darling. Some day I shall want you back—— But if there is to be war in Europe you cannot remain here."

"Why not?"

"In the first place, only useful people would be wanted in Paris——"

"But, Naïa, darling! Couldn't I be useful to you?" The girl jumped up from the sofa and came and knelt down by the Princess Mistchenka, looking up into her face.

The Princess laid aside her cigarette and put both hands on Rue's shoulders, looking her gravely, tenderly in the eyes.

"Dear," she said, "I want James Neeland to hear this, too. For it is partly a confession.

"When I first saw you, Rue, I was merely sorry for you, and willing to oblige Jim Neeland by keeping an eye on you until you were settled somewhere here in Paris.

"Before we landed I liked you. And, because I saw wonderful possibilities in the little country girl who shared my stateroom, I deliberately made up my mind

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to develop you, make use of your excellent mind, your quick intelligence, your amazing capacity for absorbing everything that is best, and your very unusual attractions for my own purposes. I meant—to train you—educate you—to aid me.”

There was a silence; the girl looked up at her, flushed, intent, perplexed; the Princess Mistchenka, her hands on the girl's shoulders, looked back at her out of grave and beautiful dark eyes.

“That is the truth,” said the Princess. “My intention was to develop you along the lines which I follow as a—profession; teach you to extract desirable information through your wit, intelligence, and beauty—using your youth as a mask. But I—I can't do it—” She shook her head slightly. “Because I've lost my heart to you. . . . And the business I follow is a rotten game.”

Again silence fell among those three; Rue, kneeling at the elder woman's feet, looked up into her face in silence; Neeland, his elbows resting on his knees, leaned slightly forward from the sofa, watching them.

“I'll help you, if you wish,” said Rue Carew.

“Thank you, dear. No.”

“Let me. I owe you everything since I have been here—”

“No, dear. What I said to you—and to James—is true. It's a merciless, stealthy, treacherous business; it's dangerous to a woman, body and soul. It is one long lifetime of experience with treachery, with greed, with baser passions, with all that is ignoble in mankind.

“There is no reason for you to enter such a circle; no excuse for it; no duty urges you; no patriotism incites you to such self-sacrifice; no memory of wrong done to your nearest and dearest inspires you to dedi-

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cate your life to aiding—if only a little, in the downfall and destruction of the nation and the people who encompassed it!”

The Princess Mistchenka’s dark eyes began to gleam, and her beautiful face lost its colour; and she took Rue’s little hands in both of hers and held them tightly against her breast.

“Had I not lost my heart to you, perhaps I should not have hesitated to develop and make use of you.

“You are fitted for the rôle I might wish you to play. Men are fascinated by you; your intelligence charms; your youth and innocence, worn as a mask, might make you invaluable to the Chancellerie which is interested in the information I provide for it.

“But, Rue, I have come to understand that I cannot do this thing. No. Go back to your painting and your clever drawing and your music; any one of these is certain to give you a living in time. And in that direction alone your happiness lies.”

She leaned forward and kissed the girl’s hair where it was fine and blond, close to the snowy forehead.

“If war comes,” she said, “you and James will have to go home, like two good children when the curfew rings.”

She laughed, pushed Rue away, lighted another cigarette, and, casting a glance partly ironical, partly provocative, at the good-looking young man on the sofa, said:

“As for you, James, I don’t worry about you. Impudence will always carry you through where diplomacy fails you. Now, tell me all about these three unpleasant sporting characters who occupied the train with you.”

Neeland laughed.

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"It seems that a well-known gambler in New York, called Captain Quint, is backing them; and somebody higher up is backing Quint——"

"Probably the Turkish Embassy at Washington," interposed the Princess, coolly. "I'm sorry, Jim; pray go on."

"The Turkish Embassy?" he repeated, surprised that she should guess.

"Yes; and the German Embassy is backing that. There you are, Jim. That is the sequence as far as your friend, Captain Quint. Now, who comes next in the scale?"

"This man—Brandes—and the little chalk-faced creature, Stull; and the other one, with the fox face—Doc Curfoot."

"I see. And then?"

"Then, as I gathered, there are several gentlemen wearing Teutonic names—who are to go into partnership with them—one named Kestner, one called Theodore Weishelm, and an exceedingly oily Eurasian gentleman with whom I became acquainted on the *Volkynis*—one Karl Breslau——"

"Breslau!" exclaimed the Princess. "Now I understand."

"Who is he, Princess?"

"He is the most notorious international spy in the world—a protean individual with aliases, professions, and experiences sufficient for an entire jail full of criminals. His father was a German Jew; his mother a Circassian girl; he was educated in Germany, France, Italy, and England. He has been a member of the socialist group in the Reichstag under one name, a member of the British Parliament under another; he did dirty work for Abdul Hamid; dirtier for Enver Bey.

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"He is here, there, everywhere; he turns up in Brazil one day, and is next in evidence in Moscow. What he is so eternally about God only knows: what Chancellery he serves, which he betrays, is a question that occupies many uneasy minds this very hour, I fancy.

"But of this I, personally, am now satisfied; Karl Breslau is responsible for the robbery of your papers today, and the entire affair was accomplished under his direction!"

"And yet I know," said Neeland, "that after he and Kestner tried to blow up the captain's cabin and the bridge aboard the *Volhynia* yesterday morning at a little after two o'clock, he and Kestner must have jumped overboard in the Mersey River off Liverpool."

"Without doubt a boat was watching your ship."

"Yes; Weishelm had a fishing smack to pick them up. Ilse Dumont must have gone with them, too."

"All they had to do was to touch at some dock, go ashore, and telegraph to their men here," said the Princess.

"That, evidently, is what they did," admitted Neeland ruefully.

"Certainly. And by *this* time they may be here, too. They could do it. I haven't any doubt that Breslau, Kestner, and Ilse Dumont are here in Paris at this moment."

"Then I'll wager I know where they are!"

"Where?"

"In the Hôtel des Bulgars, rue Vilna. That's where they are to operate a gaming house. That is where they expect to pluck and fleece the callow and the aged who may have anything of political importance about them worth stealing. That is their plan. Agents,



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officials, employees of all consulates, legations, and embassies are what they're really after. I heard them discussing it there in the train today."

The Princess had fallen very silent, musing, watching Neeland's animated face as he detailed his knowledge of what had occurred.

"Why not notify the police?" he added. "There might be a chance to recover the box and the papers."

The Princess shook her pretty head.

"We have to be very careful how we use the police, James. It seems simple, but it is not. I can't explain the reasons, but we usually pit spy against spy, and keep very clear of the police. Otherwise," she added, smiling, "there would be the deuce to pay among the embassies and legations." She added: "It's a most depressing situation; I don't exactly know what to do. . . . I have letters to write, anyway——"

She rose, turned to Rue and took both her hands:

"No; you must go back to New York and to your painting and music if there is to be war in Europe. But you have had a taste of what goes on in certain circles here; you have seen what a chain of consequences ensue from a chance remark of a young girl at a dinner table."

"Yes."

"It's amusing, isn't it? A careless and innocent word to that old busybody, Ahmed Mirka Pasha, at my table—that began it. Then another word to Isset Bey. And I had scarcely time to realise what had happened—barely time to telegraph James in New York—before their entire underground machinery was set in motion to seize those wretched papers in Brook-hollow!"

Neeland said:

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"You don't know even yet, Princess, how amazingly fast that machinery worked."

"Tell me now, James. I have time enough to write my warning since it is already too late." And she seated herself on the sofa and drew Ruhannah down beside her.

"Listen, dear," she said with pretty mockery, "here is a most worthy young man who is simply dying to let us know how picturesque a man can be when he tries to."

Neeland laughed:

"The only trouble with me," he retorted, "is that I've a rather hopeless habit of telling the truth. Otherwise there'd be some chance for me as a hero in what I'm going to tell you."

And he began with his first encounter with Ilse Dumont in Rue Carew's house at Brookhollow. After he had been speaking for less than a minute, Rue Carew's hands tightened in the clasp of the Princess Naïa, who glanced at the girl and noticed that she had lost her colour.

And Neeland continued his partly playful, partly serious narrative of "moving accidents by flood and field," aware of the girl's deep, breathless interest, moved by it, and, conscious of it, the more inclined to avoid the picturesque and heroic, and almost ashamed to talk of himself at all under the serious beauty of the girl's clear eyes.

But he could scarcely tell his tale and avoid mentioning himself; he was the centre of it all, the focus of the darts of Fate, and there was no getting away from what happened to himself.

So he made the melodrama a comedy, and the moments of deadly peril he treated lightly. And one thing

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he avoided altogether, and that was how he had kissed Ilse Dumont.

When he finished his account of his dreadful situation in the stateroom of Ilse Dumont, and how at the last second her unerring shots had shattered the bomb clock, cut the guy-rope, and smashed the water-jug which deluged the burning fuses, he added with a very genuine laugh:

“If only some photographer had taken a few hundred feet of film for me I could retire on an income in a year and never do another stroke of honest work!”

The Princess smiled, mechanically, but Rue Carew dropped her white face on the Princess Naia's shoulder as though suddenly fatigued.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### FROM FOUR TO FIVE

THE Princess Mistchenka and Rue Carew had retired to their respective rooms for that hour between four and five in the afternoon, which the average woman devotes to cat-naps or to that aimless feminine fussing which must ever remain a mystery to man.

The afternoon had turned very warm; Neeland, in his room, lay on the lounge in his undershirt and trousers, having arrived so far toward bathing and changing his attire.

No breeze stirred the lattice blinds hanging over both open windows; the semi-dusk of the room was pierced here and there by slender shafts of sunlight which lay almost white across the carpet and striped the opposite wall; the rue Soleil d'Or was very silent in the July afternoon.

And Neeland lay there thinking about all that had happened to him and trying to bring it home to himself and make it seem plausible and real; and could not.

For even now the last ten days of his life seemed like a story he had read concerning someone else. Nor did it seem to him that he personally had known all those people concerned in this wild, exaggerated, grotesque story. They, too, took their places on the printed page, appearing, lingering, disappearing, reappearing, as chapter succeeded chapter in a romance too obvious, too palpably sensational to win the confidence and credulity of a young man of today.

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Fed to repletion on noisy contemporary fiction, his finer perception blunted by the daily and raucous yell of the New York press, his imagination too long overstrained by Broadway drama and now flaccid and incapable of further response to its leering or shrieking appeal, the din of twentieth-century art fell on nerveless ears and on a brain benumbed and sceptical.

And so when everything that he had found grotesque, illogical, laboured, obvious, and elamorously redundant in literature and the drama began to happen and continued to happen in real life to him—and went on happening and involving himself and others all around him in the pleasant July sunshine of 1914, this young man, made intellectually *blasé*, found himself without sufficient capacity to comprehend it.

There was another matter with which his mind was struggling as he lay there, his head cradled on one elbow, watching the thin blue spirals from his cigarette mount straight to the ceiling, and that was the metamorphosis of Rue Carew.

Where was the thin girl he remembered—with her untidy chestnut hair and freckles, and a rather sweet mouth—dressed in garments the only mission of which was to cover a flat chest and frail body and limbs whose too rapid growth had outstripped maturity?

To search for her he went back to the beginning, where a little girl in a pink print dress, bare-legged and hatless, loitered along an ancient rail fence and looked up shyly at him as he warned her to keep out of range of the fusillade from the bushes across the pasture.

He thought of her again at the noisy party in Gayfield on that white night in winter; visualised the tall, shy, overgrown girl who danced with him and made no

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complaint when her slim foot was trodden on. And again he remembered the sleigh and the sleighbells clashing and tinkling under the moon; the light from her doorway, and how she stood looking back at him; and how, on the mischievous impulse of the moment, he had gone back and kissed her——

At the memory an odd sensation came over him, scaring him a little. How on earth had he ever had the temerity to do such a thing to her!

And, as he thought of this exquisite, slender, clear-eyed young girl who had greeted him at the Paris terminal—this charming embodiment of all that is fresh and sweet and fearless—in her perfect hat and gown of *mondaine* youth and fashion, the memory of his temerity appalled him.

Imagine his taking an unencouraged liberty now!

Nor could he dare imagine encouragement from the Rue Carew so amazingly revealed to him.

Out of what, in heaven's name, had this lovely girl developed? Out of a shy, ragged, bare-legged child, haunting the wild blackberry tangles in Brook-hollow?

Out of the frail, charmingly awkward, pathetic, freckled mill-hand in her home-made party clothes, the rather sweet expression of whose mouth once led him to impudent indiscretion?

Out of what had she been evolved—this young girl whom he had left just now standing beside her boudoir door with the Princess Naïa's arm around her waist? Out of the frightened, white-lipped, shabby girl who had come dragging her trembling limbs and her suitcase up the dark stairway outside his studio? Out of the young thing with sagging hair, crouched in an armchair beside his desk, where her cheap hat lay with

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two cheap hatpins sticking in the crown? Out of the fragile figure buried in the bedclothes of a stateroom berth, holding out to him a thin, bare arm in voiceless adieu?

And Neeland lay there thinking, his head on his elbow, the other arm extended—from the fingers of which the burnt-out cigarette presently fell to the floor.

He thought to himself:

“She is absolutely beautiful; there’s no denying that. It’s not her clothes or the way she does her hair, or her voice, or the way she moves, or how she looks at a man; it’s the whole business. And the whole bally business is a miracle, that’s all. Good Lord! And to think I ever had the nerve—the *nerve!*”

He swung himself to a sitting posture, sat gazing into space for a few moments, then continued to undress by pulling off one shoe, lighting a cigarette, and regarding his other foot fixedly.

That is the manner in which the vast majority of young men do their deepest thinking.

However, before five o’clock he had scrubbed himself and arrayed his well constructed person in fresh linen and outer clothing; and now he sauntered out through the hallway and down the stairs to the rear drawing-room, where a tea-table had been brought in and tea paraphernalia arranged. Although the lamp under the kettle had been lighted, nobody was in the room except a West Highland terrier curled up on a lounge, who, without lifting his snow-white head, regarded Neeland out of the wisest and most penetrating eyes the young man had ever encountered.

Here was a personality! Here was a dog not to be approached lightly or with flippant familiarity. No! That small, long, short-legged body with its thatch of

## FROM FOUR TO FIVE

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wiry white hair was fairly instinct with dignity, wisdom, and uncompromising self-respect.

"That dog," thought Neeland, venturing to seat himself on a chair opposite, "is a Presbyterian if ever there was one. And I, for one, haven't the courage to address him until he deigns to speak to me."

He looked respectfully at the dog, glanced at the kettle which had begun to sizzle a little, then looked out of the long windows into the little walled garden where a few slender fruit trees grew along the walls in the rear of well-kept flower beds, now gay with phlox, larkspur, poppies, and heliotrope, and edged with the biggest and bluest pansies he had ever beheld.

On the wall a Peacock butterfly spread its brown velvet and gorgeously eyed wings to the sun's warmth; a blackbird with brilliant yellow bill stood astride a peach twig and poured out a bubbling and incessant melody full of fluted grace notes. And on the grass oval a kitten frisked with the ghosts of last month's dandelions, racing after the drifting fluff and occasionally keeling over to attack its own tail, after the enchanting manner of all kittens.

A step behind him and Neeland turned. It was Marotte, the butler, who presented a thick, sealed envelope to him on his salver, bent to turn down the flame under the singing silver kettle, and withdrew without a sound.

Neeland glanced at the letter in perplexity, opened the envelope and the twice-folded sheets of letter paper inside, and read this odd communication:

Have I been fair to you? Did I keep my word? Surely you must now, in your heart, acquit me of treachery—of any premeditated violence toward you.

I never dreamed that those men would come to my



## THE DARK STAR

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stateroom. That plan *had* been discussed, but was abandoned because it appeared impossible to get hold of you.

And also—may I admit it without being misunderstood?—I absolutely refused to permit any attempt involving your death.

When the trap shut on you, there in my stateroom, it shut also on me. I was totally unprepared; I was averse to murder; and also I had given you my word of honour.

Judge, then, of my shame and desperation—my anger at being entrapped in a false position involving the loss in your eyes of my personal honour!

It was unbearable; and I did what I could to make it clear to you that I had not betrayed you. But my comrades do not yet know that I had any part in it; do not yet understand why the ship was not blown to splinters. They are satisfied that I made a mistake in the rendezvous. And, so far, no suspicion attaches to me; they believe the mechanism of the clock failed them. And perhaps it is well for me that they believe this.

It is, no doubt, a matter of indifference to you how the others and I reached safety. I have no delusions concerning any personal and kindly feeling on your part toward me. But one thing you can not—dare not—believe, and that is that I proved treacherous to you and false to my own ideas of honour.

And now let me say one more thing to you—let me say it out of a—friendship—for which you care nothing—could not care anything. And that is this: your task is accomplished. You could not possibly have succeeded. There is no chance for recovery of those papers. Your mission is definitely ended.

Now, I beg of you to return to America. Keep clear of entanglement in these events which are beginning to happen in such rapid succession in Europe. They do not concern you; you have nothing to do with them, no interest in them. Your entry into affairs which can not concern you would be insulting effrontery and foolish bravado.

I beg you to heed this warning. I know you to be personally courageous; I suppose that fear of consequences would not deter you from intrusion into any affair, however dangerous; but I dare hope that perhaps

## *FROM FOUR TO FIVE*

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in your heart there may have been born a little spark of friendliness—a faint warmth of recognition for a woman who took some slight chance with death to prove to you that her word of honour is not lightly given or lightly broken.

So, if you please, our ways part here with this letter sent to you by hand.

I shall not forget the rash but generous boy I knew who called me

**SCHEHERAZADE.**

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### TOGETHER

HE sat there, holding the letter and looking absently over it at the little dog who had gone to sleep again. There was no sound in the room save the faint whisper of the tea-kettle. The sunny garden outside was very still, too; the blackbird appeared to doze on his peach twig; the kitten had settled down with eyes half closed and tail tucked under flank.

The young man sat there with his letter in his hand and eyes lost in retrospection for a while.

In his hand lay evidence that the gang which had followed him, and through which he no longer doubted that he had been robbed, was now in Paris.

And yet he could not give this information to the Princess Naïa. Here was a letter which he could not show. Something within him forbade it, some instinct which he did not trouble to analyse.

And this instinct sent the letter into his breast pocket as a light sound came to his ears; and the next instant Rue Carew entered the further drawing-room.

The little West Highland terrier looked up, wagged that section of him which did duty as a tail, and watched her as Neeland rose to seat her at the tea-table.

"Sandy," she said to the little dog, "if you care to say 'Down with the Sultan,' I shall bestow one lump of sugar upon you."

"Yap-yap!" said the little dog.

## TOGETHER

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"Give it to him, please——" Rue handed the sugar to Neeland, who delivered it gravely.

"That's because I want Sandy to like you," she added.

Neeland regarded the little dog and addressed him politely:

"I shouldn't dare call you Sandy on such brief acquaintance," he said; "but may I salute you as Alexander? Thank you, Alexander."

He patted the dog, whose tail made a slight, sketchy motion of approval.

"Now," said Rue Carew, "you are friends, and we shall all be very happy together, I'm sure. . . . Princess Naïa said we were not to wait. Tell me how to fix your tea."

He explained. About to begin on a buttered *croissant*, he desisted abruptly and rose to receive the Princess, who entered with the light, springy step characteristic of her, gowned in one of those Parisian afternoon creations which never are seen outside that capital, and never will be.

"Far too charming to be real," commented Neeland. "You are a pretty fairy story, Princess Naïa, and your gown is a miracle tale which never was true."

He had not dared any such flippancy with Rue Carew, and the girl, who knew she was exquisitely gowned, felt an odd little pang in her heart as this young man's praise of the Princess Mistchenka fell so easily and gaily from his lips. He might have noticed her gown, as it had been chosen with many doubts, much hesitation, and anxious consideration, for him.

She flushed a little at the momentary trace of envy:

"You *are* too lovely for words," she said, rising. But the Princess gently forced her to resume her seat.

## THE DARK STAR

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"If this young man has any discrimination," she said, "he won't hesitate with the golden apple, Ruhannah."

Rue laughed and flushed:

"He hasn't noticed my gown, and I wore it for him to notice," she said. "But he was too deeply interested in Sandy and in tea and *croissants*——"

"I *did* notice it!" said Neeland. And, to that young man's surprise and annoyance, his face grew hot with embarrassment. What on earth possessed him to blush like a plow-boy! He suddenly felt like one, too, and turned sharply to the little dog, perplexed, irritated with himself and his behaviour.

Behind him the Princess was saying:

"The car is here. I shan't stop for tea, dear. In case anything happens, I am at the Embassy."

"The Russian Embassy," repeated Rue.

"Yes. I may be a little late. We are to dine here *en famille* at eight. You will entertain James——"

"James!" she repeated, addressing him. "Do you think Ruhannah sufficiently interesting to entertain you while I am absent?"

But all his aplomb, his lack of self-consciousness, seemed to be gone; and Neeland made some reply which seemed to him both obvious and dull. And hated himself because he found himself so unaccountably abashed, realising that he was afraid of the opinions that this young girl might entertain concerning him.

"I'm going," said the Princess. "*Au revoir*, dear; good-bye, James——"

She looked at him keenly when he turned to face her, smiled, still considering him as though she had unexpectedly discovered a new feature in his expressive face.

Whatever it was she discovered seemed to make her smile a trifle more mechanical; she turned slowly to

## TOGETHER

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Rue Carew, hesitated, then, nodding a gay adieu, turned and left the room with Neeland at her elbow.

"I'll tuck you in," he began; but she said:

"Thanks; Marotte will do that." And left him at the door.

When the car had driven away down the rue Soleil d'Or, Neeland returned to the little drawing-room where Rue was indulging Sandy with small bits of sugar.

He took up cup and buttered *croissant*, and for a little while nothing was said, except to Sandy who, upon invitation, repeated his opinion of the Sultan and snapped in the offered emolument with unsatiated satisfaction.

To Rue Carew as well as to Neeland there seemed to be a slight constraint between them—something not entirely new to her since they had met again after two years.

In the two years of her absence she had been very faithful to the memory of his kindness; constant in the friendship which she had given him unasked—given him first, she sometimes thought, when she was a little child in a ragged pink frock, and he was a wonderful young man who had taken the trouble to cross the pasture and warn her out of range of the guns.

He had always held his unique place in her memory and in her innocent affections; she had written to him again and again, in spite of his evident lack of interest in the girl to whom he had been kind. Rare, brief letters from him were read and reread, and laid away with her best-loved treasures. And when the prospect of actually seeing him again presented itself, she had been so frankly excited and happy that the Princess Mistchenka could find in the girl's unfeigned delight

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nothing except a young girl's touching and slightly amusing hero-worship.

But with her first exclamation when she caught sight of him at the terminal, something about her preconceived ideas of him, and her memory of him, was suddenly and subtly altered, even while his name fell from her excited lips.

Because she had suddenly realised that he was even more wonderful than she had expected or remembered, and that she did not know him at all—that she had no knowledge of this tall, handsome, well-built young fellow with his sunburnt features and his air of smiling aloofness and of graceful assurance, almost fascinating and a trifle disturbing.

Which had made the girl rather grave and timid, uncertain of the estimation in which he might hold her; no longer so sure of any encouragement from him in her perfectly obvious attitude of a friend of former days.

And so, shyly admiring, uncertain, inclined to warm response at any advance from this wonderful young man, the girl had been trying to adjust herself to this new incarnation of a certain James Neeland who had won her gratitude and who had awed her, too, from the time when, as a little girl, she had first beheld him.

She lifted her golden-grey eyes to him; a little unexpected sensation not wholly unpleasant checked her speech for a moment.

This was odd, even unaccountable. Such awkwardness, such disquieting and provincial timidity wouldn't do.

"Would you mind telling me a little about Brook-hollow?" she ventured.

Certainly he would tell her. He laid aside his plate

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and tea cup and told her of his visits there when he had walked over from Neeland's Mills in the pleasant summer weather.

Nothing had changed, he assured her; mill-dam and pond and bridge, and the rushing creek below were exactly as she knew them; her house stood there at the crossroads, silent and closed in the sunshine, and under the high moon; pickerel and sunfish still haunted the shallow pond; partridges still frequented the alders and willows across her pasture; fireflies sailed through the summer night; and the crows congregated in the evening woods and talked over the events of the day.

"And my cat? You wrote that you would take care of Adoniram."

"Adoniram is an aged patriarch and occupies the place of honour in my father's house," he said.

"He is well?"

"Oh, yes. He prefers his food cut finely, that is all."

"I don't suppose he will live very long."

"He's pretty old," admitted Neeland.

She sighed and looked out of the window at the kitten in the garden. And, after an interval of silence:

"Our plot in the cemetery—is it—pretty?"

"It is beautiful," he said, "under the great trees. It is well cared for. I had them plant the shrubs and flowers you mentioned in the list you sent me."

"Thank you." She lifted her eyes again to him. "I wonder if you realise how—how splendid you have always been to me."

Surprised, he reddened, and said awkwardly that he had done nothing. Where was the easy, gay and debonaire assurance of this fluent young man? He was finding nothing to say to Rue Carew, or saying what



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he said as crudely and uncouthly as any haymaker in Gayfield.

He looked up, exasperated, and met her eyes squarely. And Rue Carew blushed.

They both looked elsewhere at once, but in the girl's breast a new pulse beat; a new instinct stirred, blindly importuning her for recognition; a new confusion threatened the ordered serenity of her mind, vaguely menacing it with unaccustomed questions.

Then the instinct of self-command returned; she found composure with an effort.

"You haven't asked me," she said, "about my work. Would you like to know?"

He said he would; and she told him—chary of self-praise, yet eager that he should know that her masters had spoken well of her.

"And you know," she said, "every week, now, I contribute a drawing to the illustrated paper I wrote to you about. I sent one off yesterday. But," and she laughed shyly, "my nostrils are no longer filled with pride, because I am not contented with myself any more. I wish to do—oh, so much better work!"

"Of course. Contentment in creative work means that we have nothing more to create."

She nodded and smiled:

"The youngest born is the most tenderly cherished—until a new one comes. It is that way with me; I am all love and devotion and tenderness and self-sacrifice while fussing over my youngest. Then a still younger comes, and I become like a heartless cat and drive away all progeny except the newly born."

She sighed and smiled and looked up at him:

"It can't be helped, I suppose—that is, if one's going to have more progeny."

## TOGETHER

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"It's our penalty for producing. Only the newest counts. And those to come are to be miracles. But they never are."

She nodded seriously.

"When there is a better light I should like to show you some of my studies," she ventured. "No, not now. I am too vain to risk anything except the kindest of morning lights. Because I do hope for your approval——"

"I know they're good," he said. And, half laughingly: "I'm beginning to find out that you're a rather wonderful and formidable and overpowering girl, Ru-hannah."

"You don't think so!" she exclaimed, enchanted. "Do you? Oh, dear! Then I feel that I ought to show you my pictures and set you right immediately——" She sprang to her feet. "I'll get them; I'll be only a moment——"

She was gone before he discovered anything to say, leaving him to walk up and down the deserted room and think about her as clearly as his somewhat dislocated thoughts permitted, until she returned with both arms full of portfolios, boards, and panels.

"Now," she said with a breathless smile, "you may mortify my pride and rebuke my vanity. I deserve it; I need it; but Oh!—don't be too severe——"

"Are you serious?" he asked, looking up in astonishment from the first astonishing drawing in colour which he held between his hands.

"Serious? Of course——" She met his eyes anxiously, then her own became incredulous and the swift colour dyed her face.

"Do you *like* my work?" she asked in a fainter voice.

## THE DARK STAR

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"Like it!" He continued to stare at the bewildering grace and colour of the work, turned to another and lifted it to the light:

"What's this?" he demanded.

"A monotype."

"You did it?"

"Y-yes."

He seemed unable to take his eyes from it—from the exquisite figures there in the sun on the bank of the brimming river under an iris-tinted April sky.

"What do you call it, Rue?"

"Baroque."

He continued to scrutinise it in silence, then drew another carton prepared for oil from the sheaf on the sofa.

Over autumn woods, in a windy sky, high-flying crows were buffeted and blown about. From the stark trees a few phantom leaves clung, fluttering; and the whole scene was possessed by sinuous, whirling forms—mere glimpses of supple, exquisite shapes tossing, curling, flowing through the naked woodland. A delicate finger caught at a dead leaf here; there frail arms clutched at a bending, wind-tossed bough; grey sky and ghostly forest were obsessed, bewitched by the winnowing, driving torrent of airy, half seen spirits.

"The Winds," he said mechanically.

He looked at another—a sketch of the Princess Naïa. And somehow it made him think of vast skies and endless plains and the tumult of surging men and rattling lances.

"A Cossack," he said, half to himself. "I never before realised it." And he laid it aside and turned to the next.

"I haven't brought any life studies or school draw-

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ings," she said. "I thought I'd just show you the— the results of them and of—of whatever is in me."

"I'm just beginning to understand what is in you," he said.

"Tell me—what is it?" she asked, almost timidly.

"Tell *you?*" He rose, stood by the window looking out, then turned to her:

"What can *I* tell you?" he added with a short laugh.

"What have I to say to a girl who can do—*these*— after two years abroad?"

Sheer happiness kept her silent. She had not dared hope for such approval. Even now she dared not permit herself to accept it.

"I have so much to say," she ventured, "and such an appalling amount of work before I can learn to say it——"

"Your work is—stunning!" he said bluntly.

"You don't think so!" she exclaimed incredulously.

"Indeed I do! Look at what you have done in two years. Yes, grant all your aptitude and talents, just look what you've *accomplished* and where you *are*! Look at you yourself, too—what a stunning, bewildering sort of girl you've developed into!"

"Jim Neeland!"

"Certainly, Jim Neeland, of Neeland's Mills, who has had years more study than you have, more years of advantage, and who now is an illustrator without anything in particular to distinguish him from the several thousand other American illustrators——"

"Jim! Your work is charming!"

"How do *you* know?"

"Because I have everything you ever did! I sent for the magazines and cut them out; and they are in my scrapbook——"

## THE DARK STAR

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She hesitated, breathless, smiling back at him out of her beautiful golden-grey eyes as though challenging him to doubt her loyalty or her belief in him.

It was rather curious, too, for the girl was unusually intelligent and discriminating; and Neeland's work was very, very commonplace.

His face had become rather sober, but the smile still lurked on his lips.

"Rue," he said, "you are wonderfully kind. But I'm afraid I know about my work. I can draw pretty well, according to school standards; and I approach pretty nearly the same standards in painting. Probably that is why I became an instructor at the Art League. But, so far, I haven't done anything better than what is called 'acceptable.'"

"I don't agree with you," she said warmly.

"It's very kind of you not to." He laughed and walked to the window again, and stood there looking out across the sunny garden. "Of course," he added over his shoulder, "I expect to get along all right. Mediocrity has the best of chances, you know."

"You are *not* mediocre!"

"No, I don't think I am. But my work is. And, do you know," he continued thoughtfully, "that is very often the case with a man who is better equipped to act than to tell with pen or pencil how others act. I'm beginning to be afraid that I'm that sort, because I'm afraid that I get more enjoyment out of doing things than in explaining with pencil and paint how they are done."

But Rue Carew, seated on the arm of her chair, slowly shook her head:

"I don't think that those are the only alternatives; do you?"

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"What other is there?"

She said, a little shyly:

"I think it is all right to *do* things if you like; make exact pictures of how things are done if you choose; but it seems to me that if one really has anything to say, one should show in one's pictures how things *might* be or *ought* to be. Don't you?"

He seemed surprised and interested in her logic, and she took courage to speak again in her pretty, deprecating way:

"If the function of painting and literature is to reflect reality, a mirror would do as well, wouldn't it? But to reflect what might be or what ought to be requires something more, doesn't it?"

"Imagination. Yes."

"A mind, anyway. . . . That is what I have thought; but I'm not at all sure I am right."

"I don't know. The mind ought to be a mirror reflecting only the essentials of reality."

"And *that* requires imagination, doesn't it?" she asked. "You see you have put it much better than I have."

"Have I?" he returned, smiling. "After a while you'll persuade me that I possess your imagination, Rue. But I don't."

"You do, Jim——"

"I'm sorry; I don't. You construct, I copy; you create, I ring changes on what already is; you dissect, I skate over the surface of things—Oh, Lord! I don't know what's lacking in me!" he added with gay pretence of despair which possibly was less feigned than real. "But I know this, Rue Carew! I'd rather experience something interesting than make a picture of it. And I suppose that confession is fatal."

## THE DARK STAR

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“Why, Jim?”

“Because with me the pleasures of reality are substituted for the pleasures of imagination. Not that I don’t like to draw and paint. But my ambition in painting is and always has been bounded by the visible. And, although that does not prevent me from appreciation—from understanding and admiring your work, for example—it sets an impregnable limit to any such aspiration on my part——”

His mobile and youthful features had become very grave; he stood a moment with lowered head as though what he was thinking of depressed him; then the quick smile came into his face and cleared it, and he said gaily:

“I’m an artistic *Dobbin*; a reliable, respectable sort of Fido on whom editors can depend; that’s all. Don’t feel sorry for me,” he added, laughing; “my work will be very much in demand.”

## CHAPTER XXIX

### EN FAMILLE

THE Princess Mistchenka came leisurely and gracefully downstairs a little before eight that evening, much pleased with her hair, complexion, and gown.

She found Neeland alone in the music-room, standing in the attitude of the conventional Englishman with his back to the fireless grate and his hands clasped loosely behind him, waiting to be led out and fed.

The direct glance of undisguised admiration with which he greeted the Princess Naïa confirmed the impression she herself had received from her mirror, and brought an additional dash of colour into her delicate brunette face.

"Is there any doubt that you are quite the prettiest *objet d'art* in Paris?" he enquired anxiously, taking her hand; and her dark eyes were very friendly as he saluted her finger-tips with the reverent and slightly exaggerated appreciation of a connoisseur in sculpture.

"You hopeless Irishman," she laughed. "It's fortunate for women that you're never serious, even with yourself."

"Princess Naïa," he remonstrated, "can nothing short of kissing you convince you of my sincerity and——"

"Impudence?" she interrupted smilingly. "Oh, yes, I'm convinced, James, that, lacking other material, you'd make love to a hitching post."



## THE DARK STAR

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His hurt expression and protesting gesture appealed to the universe against misinterpretation, but the Princess Mistchenka laughed again unfeelingly, and seated herself at the piano.

"Some day," she said, striking a lively chord or two, "I hope you'll catch it, young man. You're altogether too free and easy with your feminine friends. . . . What do you think of Rue Carew?"

"An astounding and enchanting transformation. I haven't yet recovered my breath."

"When you do, you'll talk nonsense to the child, I suppose."

"Princess! Have I ever——"

"You talk little else, dear friend, when God sends a pretty fool to listen!" She looked up at him from the keyboard over which her hands were nervously wandering. "I ought to know," she said; "I also have listened." She laughed carelessly, but her glance lingered for an instant on his face, and her mirth did not sound quite spontaneous to either of them.

Two years ago there had been an April evening after the opera, when, in taking leave of her in her little *salon*, her hand had perhaps retained his a fraction of a second longer than she quite intended; and he had, inadvertently, kissed her.

He had thought of it as a charming and agreeable incident; what the Princess Naïa Mistchenka thought of it she never volunteered. But she so managed that he never again was presented with a similar opportunity.

Perhaps they both were thinking of this rather ancient episode now, for his face was touched with a mischievously reminiscent smile, and she had lowered her head a trifle over the keyboard where her slim, ivory-

## EN FAMILLE

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tinted hands still idly searched after elusive harmonies in the subdued light of the single lamp.

"There's a man dining with us," she remarked, "who has the same irresponsible and casual views on life and manners which you entertain. No doubt you'll get along very well together."

"Who is he?"

"A Captain Sengoun, one of our attachés. It's likely you'll find a congenial soul in this same Cossack whom we all call Alak." She added maliciously: "His only logic is the impulse of the moment, and he is known as Prince Erlik among his familiars. Erlik was the Devil, you know——"

He was announced at that moment, and came marching in—a dark, handsome, wiry young man with winning black eyes and a little black moustache just shadowing his short upper lip—and a head shaped to contain the devil himself—the most reckless looking head, Neeland thought, that he ever had beheld in all his life.

But the young fellow's frank smile was utterly irresistible, and his straight manner of facing one, and of looking directly into the eyes of the person he addressed in his almost too perfect English, won any listener immediately.

He bowed formally over Princess Naïa's hand, turned squarely on Neeland when he was named to the American, and exchanged a firm clasp with him. Then, to the Princess:

"I am late? No? Fancy, Princess—that great booby, Izzet Bey, must stop me at the club, and I exceedingly pressed to dress and entirely out of humour with all Turks. '*Eh bien, mon vieux!*' said he in his mincing manner of a nervous pelican, 'they're warming up the Balkan boilers with Austrian pine. But I hear

they're full of snow.' And I said to you very nicely if the fire is sufficiently hot, I think Izzet Bey will find it so!"—with an explanation to Neeland: "He means what you see; and that boils beautifully while stoking the boiler with Austrian fuel."

The Princess shrugged:

"What schoolboy repartée! What do you think of him at all, Alak?"

"Well," explained the attaché, "I had eight I hadn't time to take him by the hand."

Rue Carew entered and went to the door to attend:

"I'm so sorry to be late!"—turning to Neeland, then offered her hand to the girl. "What do you do, Prince Erlik?" she said with the gay cordiality of old acquaintance. "I was talking something about Colonel Izzet Bey to you in."

Captain Sengoun bowed over her.

"The Mohammedan nose of Izzet Bey is a fine bit of Oriental architecture, Miss Carew. It surprises you to hear me extol it?"

"Anyway," said the girl, "I'm contentedly for reverie." And, Marot having said this, she took the arm of Captain Sengoun. The Princess took Neeland's.

Like all Russians and some Cossacs, he drank as though it were the most important thing in life; and he did it with a wholehearted satisfaction that was flattering to almost anybody observing him.

His teeth were even and very white.

## EN FAMILLE

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splendid: when he did his goblet the honour of noticing it at all, it was to drain it; when he resumed knife and fork he used them as gaily, as gracefully, and as thoroughly as he used his sabre on various occasions.

He had taken an instant liking to Neeland, who seemed entirely inclined to return it; and he talked a great deal to the American but with a nice division of attention for the two ladies on either side.

"You know, Alak," said the Princess, "you need not torture yourself by trying to converse with discretion; because Mr. Neeland knows about many matters which concern us all."

"Ah! That is delightful! And indeed I was already quite assured of Mr. Neeland's intelligent sympathy in the present state of European affairs."

"He's done a little more than express sympathy," remarked the Princess; and she gave a humorous outline of Neeland's part in the affair of the olive-wood box.

"Fancy!" exclaimed Captain Sengoun. "That impudent *canaille!* Yes; I heard at the Embassy what happened to that accursed box this morning. Of course it is a misfortune, but as for me, personally, I don't care——"

"It doesn't happen to concern you personally, Prince Erlik," said Princess Naïa dryly.

"No," he admitted, unabashed by the snub, "it does not touch me. Cavalry cannot operate on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Therefore, God be thanked, I shall be elsewhere when the snow boils."

Rue turned to Neeland:

"His one idea of diplomacy and war is a thousand Kuban Cossacks at full speed."

"And that is an excellent idea, is it not, Kazatchka?"

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he said, smiling impudently at the Princess, who only laughed at the familiarity.

"I hope," added Captain Sengoun, "that I may live to gallop through a few miles of diplomacy at full speed before they consign me to the Opolchina." Turning to Neeland, "The reserve—the old man's home, you know. God forbid!" And he drained his goblet and looked defiantly at Rue Carew.

"A Cossack is a Cossack," said the Princess, "be he Terek or Kuban, Don or Astrachan, and they all know as much about diplomacy as Prince Erlik—or Izzet Bey's nose. . . . James, you are unusually silent, dear friend. Are you regretting those papers?"

"It's a pity," he said. But he had not been thinking of the lost papers; Rue Carew's beauty preoccupied him. The girl was in black, which made her skin dazzling, and reddened the chestnut colour of her hair.

Her superb young figure revealed an unsuspected loveliness where the snowy symmetry of neck and shoulders and arms was delicately accented by the filmy black of her gown.

He had never seen such a beautiful girl; she seemed more wonderful, more strange, more aloof than ever. And this was what preoccupied and entirely engaged his mind, and troubled it, so that his smile had a tendency to become indefinite and his conversation mechanical at times.

Captain Sengoun drained one more of numerous goblets; gazed sentimentally at the Princess, then with equal sentiment at Rue Carew.

"As for me," he said, with a carelessly happy gesture toward the infinite, "plans are plans, and if they're stolen, *tant pis!* But there are always Tartars in Tartary and Turks in Turkey. And, while there are,

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there's hope for a poor devil of a Cossack who wants to say a prayer in St. Sophia before he's gathered to his ancestors."

"Have any measures been taken at your Embassy to trace the plans?" asked Neeland of the Princess.

"Of course," she said simply.

"Plans," remarked Sengoun, "are not worth the *tcherkeske* of an honest Caucasian! A Khirgize pony knows more than any diplomat; and my *magaika* is better than both!"

"All the same," said Rue Carew, "with those stolen plans in your Embassy, Prince Erlik, you might even gallop a *sotnia* of your Cossacks to the top of Achi-Baba."

"By heaven! I'd like to try!" he exclaimed, his black eyes ablaze.

"There are *dongas*," observed the Princess dryly.

"I know it. There are *dongas* every twenty yards; and Turkish gorse that would stop a charging bull! My answer is, mount! trot! gallop! and hurrah for Achi-Baba!"

"Very picturesque, Alak. But wouldn't it be nicer to be able to come back again and tell us all about it?"

"As for that," he said with his full-throated, engaging laugh, "no need to worry, Princess, for the newspapers would tell the story. What is this Gallipoli country, anyway, that makes our Chancellery wag its respected head and frown and whisper in corners and take little notes on its newly laundered cuffs?"

"I know the European and Asiatic shores with their forts—Kilid Bahr, Chimilik, Kum Kale, Dardanos. I know what those Germans have been about with their barbed wire and mobile mortar batteries. What do we want of their plans, then——"

## THE DARK STAR

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"Nothing, Prince Erlik?" said Rue, laughing. "It suffices that you be appointed adviser in general to his majesty the Czar."

Sengoun laughed with all his might.

"And an excellent thing that would be, Miss Carew. What we need in Russia," he added with a bow to the Princess, "are, first of all, more Kazatchkees, then myself to execute any commands with which my incomparable Princess might deign to honour me."

"Then I command you to go and smoke cigarettes in the music-room and play some of your Cossack songs on the piano for Mr. Neeland until Miss Carew and I rejoin you," said the Princess, rising.

At the door there was a moment of ceremony; then Sengoun, passing his arm through Neeland's with boyish confidence that his quickly given friendship was welcome, sauntered off to the music-room where presently he was playing the piano and singing some of the entrancing songs of his own people in a voice that, cultivated, might have made a fortune for him:

"We are but horsemen,  
And God is great.  
We hunt on hill and fen  
The fierce Kerait,  
Naiman and Eighur,  
Tartar and Khiounnou,  
Leopard and Tiger  
Flee at our view-halloo;  
We are but horsemen  
Cleansing the hill and fen  
Where wild men hide—  
Wild beasts abide,  
Mongol and Baiaghod,  
Turkoman, Taïdjigod,  
Each in his den.

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The skies are blue,  
The plains are wide,  
Over the fens the horsemen ride!"

Still echoing the wild air, and playing with both hands in spite of the lighted cigarette between his fingers, he glanced over his shoulder at Neeland:

"A very old, old song," he explained, "made in the days of the great invasion when all the world was fighting anybody who would fight back. I made it into English. It's quite nice, I think."

His naïve pleasure in his own translation amused Neeland immensely, and he said that he considered it a fine piece of verse.

"Yes," said Sengoun, "but you ought to hear a love song I made out of odd fragments I picked up here and there. I call it '*Samarcand*'; or rather '*Samarcand Mahfouzeh*,' which means, 'Samarcand the Well Guarded':

"'Outside my guarded door  
Whose voice repeats my name?  
'The voice thou hast heard before  
Under the white moon's flame!  
And thy name is my song; and my song is ever the same!'

"'How many warriors, dead,  
Have sung the song you sing?  
Some by an arrow were sped;  
Some by a dagger's sting.'  
'Like a bird in the night is my song—a bird on the wing!'

"'Ahmed and Yuouf bled!  
A dead king blocks my door!  
'If thy halls and walls be red,  
Shall Samarcand ask more?  
Or my song shall cleanse thy house or my heart's blood  
foul thy floor!'



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“Now hast thou conquered me!  
Humbly thy captive, I.  
My soul escapes to thee;  
My body here must lie;  
Ride!—with thy song, and my soul in thy arms; and  
let me die.”

Sengoun, still playing, flung over his shoulder:

“A Tartar song from the Turcoman. I borrowed it  
and put new clothes on it. Nice, isn't it?”

“Enchanting!” replied Neeland, laughing in spite of  
himself.

Rue Carew, with her snowy shoulders and red-gold  
hair, came drifting in, consigning them to their seats  
with a gesture, and giving them to understand that she  
had come to hear the singing.

So Sengoun continued his sketchy, haphazard recital,  
waving his cigarette now and then for emphasis, and  
conversing frequently over his shoulder while Rue Ca-  
rew leaned on the piano and gravely watched his  
nimble fingers alternately punish and caress the key-  
board.

After a little while the Princess Mistchenka came in  
saying that she had letters to write. They conversed,  
however, for nearly an hour before she rose, and Cap-  
tain Sengoun gracefully accepted his *congé*.

“I'll walk with you, if you like,” suggested Neeland.

“With pleasure, my dear fellow! The night is beau-  
tiful, and I am just beginning to wake up.”

“Ask Marotte to give you a key, then,” suggested the  
Princess, going. At the foot of the stairs, however, she  
paused to exchange a few words with Captain Sengoun  
in a low voice; and Neeland, returning with his latch-  
key, went over to where Rue stood by the lamplit table  
absently looking over an evening paper.

## EN FAMILLE

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As he came up beside her, the girl lifted her beautiful, golden-grey eyes.

"Are you going out?"

"Yes, I thought I'd walk a bit with Captain Sengoun."

"It's rather a long distance to the Russian Embassy. Besides——" She hesitated, and he waited. She glanced absently over the paper for a moment, then, not raising her eyes: "I'm—I—the theft of that box today—perhaps my nerves have suffered a little—but do you think it quite prudent for you to go out alone at night?"

"Why, I am going out with Captain Sengoun!" he said, surprised at her troubled face.

"But you will have to return alone."

He laughed, but they both had flushed a little.

Had it been any other woman in the world, he had not hesitated gaily to challenge the shy and charming solicitude expressed in his behalf—make of it his capital, his argument to force that pretty duel to which one day, all youth is destined.

He found himself now without a word to say, nor daring to entertain any assumption concerning the words she had uttered.

Dumb, awkward, afraid, he became conscious that something in this young girl had silenced within him any inclination to gay effrontery, any talent for casual gallantry. Her lifted eyes, with their clear, half shy regard, had killed all fluency of tongue in him—slain utterly that light good-humour with which he had encountered women heretofore.

He said:

"I hadn't thought myself in any danger whatever. Is there any reason for me to expect further trouble?"

## THE DARK STAR

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Rue raised her troubled eyes:

"Has it occurred to you that *they* might think you capable of redrawing parts of the stolen plans from memory?"

"It had never occurred to me," he admitted, surprised. "But I believe I could remember a little about one or two of the more general maps."

"The Princess means to ask you, tomorrow, to draw for her what you can remember. And that made me think about you now—whether the *others* might not suspect you capable of remembering enough to do them harm. . . . And so—do you think it prudent to go out tonight?"

"Yes," he replied, quite sincerely, "it is all right. You see I know Paris very well."

She did not look convinced, but Sengoun came up and she bade them both good night and went away with the Princess Mistchenka.

As, arm in arm, the two young men sauntered around the corner of the rue Soleil d'Or, two men who had been sitting on a marble bench beside the sun-dial fountain rose and strolled after them.

## CHAPTER XXX

### JARDIN RUSSE

AT midnight the two young men had not yet parted. For, as Sengoun explained, the hour for parting was already past, and it was too late to consider it now. And Neeland thought so, too, what with the laughter and the music, and the soft night breezes to counsel folly, and the city's haunting brilliancy stretching away in bewitching perspectives still unexplored.

From every fairy lamp the lustrous capital signalled to youth her invitation, her challenge, and her menace. Like some jewelled sorceress—some dreaming Circe by the river bank, pondering new spells—so Paris lay in all her mystery and beauty under the July stars.

Sengoun, his arm through Neeland's, had become affectionately confidential. He explained that he really was a nocturnal creature; that now he had completely waked up; that his habits were due to a passion for astronomy, and that the stars he had discovered at odd hours of the early morning were more amazing than any celestial bodies ever before identified.

But Neeland, whose head and heart were already occupied, declined to study any constellations; and they drifted through the bluish lustre of white arc-lights and the clustered yellow glare of incandescent lamps toward a splash of iridescent glory among the chestnut trees, where music sounded and tables stood amid flowers and grass and little slender fountains which balanced silver globes upon their jets.

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The waiters were in Russian peasant dress; the orchestra was Russian gipsy; the bill of fare was Russian; and there was only champagne to be had.

Balalaika orchestra and spectators were singing some evidently familiar song—one of those rushing, clattering, clashing choruses of the Steppes; and Sengoun sang too, with all his might, when he and Neeland were seated, which was thirsty work.

Two fascinating Russian gipsy girls were dancing—slim, tawny, supple creatures in their scarlet and their jingling bangles. After a deafening storm of applause, their flashing smiles swept the audience, and, linking arms, they sauntered off between the tables under the trees.

“I wish to dance,” remarked Sengoun. “My legs will kick over something if I don’t.”

They were playing an American dance—a sort of skating step; people rose; couple after couple took the floor; and Sengoun looked around for a partner. He discovered no eligible partner likely to favour him without a quarrel with her escort; and he was debating with Neeland whether a row would be worth while, when the gipsy girls sauntered by.

“Oh,” he said gaily, “a pretty Tzigane can save my life if she will!”

And the girls laughed and Sengoun led one of them out at a reckless pace.

The other smiled and looked at Neeland, and, seating herself, leaned on the table watching the whirl on the floor.

“Don’t you dance?” she asked, with a sidelong glance out of her splendid black eyes.

“Yes; but I’m likely to do most of my dancing on your pretty feet.”

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“*Merci!* In that case I prefer a cigarette.”

She selected one from his case, lighted it, folded her arms on the table, and continued to gaze at the dancers.

“I’m tired tonight,” she remarked.

“You dance beautifully.”

“Thank you.”

Sengoun, flushed and satisfied, came back with his gipsy partner when the music ceased.

“Now I hope we may have some more singing!” he exclaimed, as they seated themselves and a waiter filled their great, bubble-shaped glasses.

And he did sing at the top of his delightful voice when the balalaikas swept out into a ringing and familiar song, and the two gipsy girls sang, too—laughed and sang, holding the frosty goblets high in the sparkling light.

It was evident to Neeland that the song was a favourite one with Russians. Sengoun was quite overcome; they all touched goblets.

“Brava, my little Tziganes!” he said with happy emotion. “My little compatriots! My little tawny panthers of the Caucasus! What do you call yourselves in this bandbox of a country where two steps backward take you across any frontier?”

His dancing partner laughed till her sequins jingled from throat to ankle:

“They call us Fifi and Nini,” she replied. “Ask yourself why!”

“For example,” added the other girl, “we rise from this table and thank you. There is nothing further. *C’est fini—c’est Fifi—Nini—comprenez-vous, Prince Erlük?*”

“Hi! What?” exclaimed Sengoun. “I’m known, it appears, even to that devilish name of mine!”

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Everybody laughed.

"After all," he said, more soberly, "it's a gipsy's trade to know everybody and everything. *Tiens!*" He slapped a goldpiece on the table. "A kiss apiece against a louis that you don't know my comrade's name and nation!"

The girl called Nini laughed:

"We're quite willing to kiss you, Prince Erlik, but a *louis d'or* is not a copper penny. And your comrade is American and his name is Tchames."

"James!" exclaimed Sengoun.

"I said so—Tchames."

"What else?"

"Nilan."

"Neeland?"

"I said so."

Sengoun placed the goldpiece in Nini's hand and looked at Neeland with an uncomfortable laugh.

"I ought to know a gipsy, but they always astonish me, these Tziganes. Tell us some more, Nini——" He beckoned a waiter and pointed indignantly at the empty goblets.

The girls, resting their elbows on the tables, framed their faces with slim and dusky hands, and gazed at Sengoun out of humorous, half-veiled eyes.

"What do you wish to know, Prince Erlik?" they asked mockingly.

"Well, for example, is my country really mobilising?"

"Since the twenty-fifth."

"*Tiens!* And old Papa Kaiser and the Clown Prince Footit—what do they say to that?"

"It must be stopped."

"What! *Sang dieu!* We must stop mobilising

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against the Austrians? But we are not going to stop, you know, while Francis Joseph continues to pull faces at poor old Servian Peter!"

Neeland said:

"The evening paper has it that Austria is more reasonable and that the Servian affair can be arranged. There will be no war," he added confidently.

"There will be war," remarked Nini with a shrug of her bare, brown shoulders over which her hair and her gilded sequins fell in a bright mass.

"Why?" asked Neeland, smiling.

"Why? Because, for one thing, you have brought war into Europe!"

"Come, now! No mystery!" said Sengoun gaily. "Explain how my comrade has brought war into Europe, you little fraud!"

Nini looked at Neeland:

"What else except papers was in the box you lost?" she asked coolly.

Neeland, very red and uncomfortable, gazed back at the girl without replying; and she laughed at him, showing her white teeth.

"You brought the Yellow Devil into Europe, M'sieu Nilan! Erlik, the Yellow Demon. When he travels there is unrest. Where he rests there is war!"

"You're very clever," retorted Neeland, quite out of countenance.

"Yes, we are," said Fif, with her quick smile. "And who but M'sieu Nilan should admit it?"

"Very clever," repeated Neeland, still amazed and profoundly uneasy. "But this Yellow Devil you say I brought into Europe must have been resting in America, then. And, if so, why is there no war there?"



## THE DARK STAR

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"There would have been—with Mexico. You brought the Yellow Demon here, but just in time!"

"All right. Grant that, then. But—perhaps he was a long time resting in America. What about that, pretty gipsy?"

The girl shrugged again:

"Is your memory so poor, M'sieu Nilan? What has your country done but fight since Erlik rested among your people? You fought in Samoa; in Hawaii; your warships went to Chile, to Brazil, to San Domingo; the blood of your soldiers and sailors was shed in Hayti, in Cuba, in the Philippines, in China——"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Neeland. "That girl is dead right!"

Sengoun threw back his handsome head and laughed without restraint; and the gipsies laughed, too, their beautiful eyes and teeth flashing under their black cascades of unbound hair.

"Show me your palms," said Nini, and drew Sengoun's and Neeland's hands across the table, holding them in both of hers.

"See," she added, nudging Fifi with her shoulder, "both of them born under the Dark Star! It is war they shall live to see—war!"

"Under the Dark Star, Erlik," repeated the other girl, looking closely into the two palms, "and there is war there?"

"And death?" inquired Sengoun gaily. "I don't care, if I can lead a *sotnia* up Achi-Baba and twist the gullet of the Padisha before I say Fifi—Nini!"

The gipsies searched his palm with intent and brilliant gaze.

"Zut!" said Fifi. "*Je ne vois rien que d'amour et la guerre aux dames!*"

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"*T'en fais pas!*" laughed Sengoun. "I ask no further favour of Fortune; I'll manage my regiment myself. And, listen to me, Fifi," he added with a frightful frown, "if the war you predict doesn't arrive, I'll come back and beat you as though you were married to a Turk!"

While they still explored his palm, whispering together at intervals, Sengoun caught the chorus of the air which the orchestra was playing, and sang it lustily and with intense pleasure to himself.

Neeland, unquiet to discover how much these casual strangers knew about his own and intimate affairs, had become silent and almost glum.

But the slight gloom which invaded him came from resentment toward those people who had followed him from Brookhollow to Paris, and who, in the very moment of victory, had snatched that satisfaction from him.

He thought of Kestner and of Breslau—of Scheherazade, and the terrible episode in her stateroom.

Except that he had seized the box in the Brookhollow house, there was nothing in his subsequent conduct on which he could plume himself. He could not congratulate himself on his wisdom; sheer luck had carried him through as far as the rue Soleil d'Or—mere chance, and that capricious fortune which sometimes convoys the stupid, fatuous, and astigmatic.

Then he thought of Rue Carew. And, in his bosom, an intense desire to distinguish himself began to burn.

If there were any way on earth to trace that accursed box——

He turned abruptly and looked at the two who had relinquished Sangoun's hand and who were still conversing together in low tones while Sar

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beat time on the jingling table top and sang joyously at the top of his baritone voice:

“Eh, zoum—zoum—zoum!  
Boum—boum—boum!  
Here’s to the Artillery  
Gaily riding by!  
Fetch me a distillery,  
Let me drink it dry—  
Fill me full of sillery!  
Here’s to the artillery!  
Zoum—zoum—zoum!  
Boum—boum—boum!”

“Fifi!”

“*M’sieu?*”

“You’re so clever! Where is that Yellow Devil now?”

“Pouf!” giggled Fifi. “On its way to Berlin, *paradis!*”

“That’s easy to say. Tell me something else more expensive.”

Nini said, surprised:

“What we know is free to Prince Erlik’s friend. Did you think we sell to Russians?”

“I don’t know anything about you or where you get your information,” said Neeland. “I suppose you’re in the Secret Service of the Russian Government.”

“*Mon ami*, Nilan,” said Fifi, smiling, “we should feel lonely *outside* the Secret Service. Few in Europe are outside—few in the world, fewer in the half-world. As for us Tziganes, who belong to neither, the business of everybody becomes our secret to sell for a silver piece—but *not* to Russians in the moment of peril! . . . Nor to their comrades. . . . What do you desire to know, *comrade?*”

“Anything,” he said simply, “that might help me to regain what I have lost.”

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"And what do you suppose!" exclaimed Fifi, opening her magnificent black eyes very wide. "Did you imagine that nobody was paying any attention to what happened in the rue Soleil d'Or this noon?"

Nini laughed.

"The word flew as fast as the robber's taxicab. How many thousand secret friends to the Triple Entente do you suppose knew of it half an hour after it happened? From the Trocadero to Montparnasse, from the Point du Jour to Charenton, from the Bois to the Bièvre, the word flew. Every taxicab, omnibus, *sapin*, every *bateau-mouche*, every train that left any terminal was watched.

"Five embassies and legations were instantly under redoubled surveillance; hundreds of *cafés*, bars, restaurants, *hôtels*; all the theatres, gardens, cabarets, *braseries*.

"Your pigs of Apaches are not neglected, *va!* But, to my idea, they got out of Paris before we watchers knew of the affair at all—in an automobile, perhaps—perhaps by rail. God knows," said the girl, looking absently at the dancing which had begun again. "But if we ever lay our eyes on Minna Minti, we wear toys in our garters which will certainly persuade her to take a little stroll with us."

After a silence, Neeland said:

"Is Minna Minti then so well known?"

"Not at the Opéra Comique," replied Fifi with a shrug, "but *since* then."

"An *artiste*, that woman!" added Nini. "Why deny it? It appears that she has twisted more than one red button out of a broadcloth coat."

"She'll get the Seraglio medal for this day's work," said Fifi.

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"Or the *croix-de-fer*," added Nini. "Ah, *sut!* She annoys me."

"Did you ever hear of a place called the *Café des Bulgars?*" asked Neeland, carelessly.

"Yes."

"What sort of place is it?"

"Like any other."

"Quite respectable?"

"Perfectly," said Nini, smiling. "One drinks good beer there."

"Munich beer," added Fifi.

"Then it is watched?" asked Neeland.

"All German cafés are watched. Otherwise, it is not suspected."

Sengoun, who had been listening, shook his head. "There's nothing to interest us at the *Café des Bulgars*," he said. Then he summoned a waiter and pointed tragically at the empty goblets.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE CAFE DES BULGARS

THEIR adieux to Fifi and Nini were elaborate and complicated by bursts of laughter. The Tziganes recommended Captain Sengoun to go home and seek further adventures on his pillow; and had it not been for the gay babble of the fountain and the persistent perfume of flowers, he might have followed their advice.

It was after the two young men had left the Jardin Russe that Captain Sengoun positively but affectionately refused to relinquish possession of Neeland's arm.

"Dear friend," he explained, "I am just waking up and I do not wish to go to bed for days and days."

"But I do," returned Neeland, laughing. "Where do you want to go now, Prince Erlik?"

The champagne was singing loudly in the Cossack's handsome head; the distant brilliancy beyond the Place de la Concorde riveted his roving eyes.

"Over there," he said joyously. "Listen, old fellow, I'll teach you the skating step as we cross the Place! Then, in the first *Bal*, you shall try it on the fairest form since Helen fell and Troy burned—or Troy fell and Helen burned—it's all the same, old fellow—what you call fifty-fifty, eh?"

Neeland tried to free his arm—to excuse himself; two policemen laughed; but Sengoun, linking his arm more firmly in Neeland's, crossed the Place in a series of Dutch rolls and outer edges, in which Neeland was compelled to join. The Russian was as light and grace-

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ful on his feet as one of the dancers of his own country; Neeland's knowledge of skating aided his own less agile steps. There was sympathetic applause from passing taxis and *fiacres*; and they might, apparently, have had any number of fair partners for the asking, along the way, except for Sengoun's headlong dive toward the brightest of the boulevard lights beyond.

In the rue Royal, however, Sengoun desisted with sudden access of dignity, remarking that such gambols were not worthy of the best traditions of his Embassy; and he attempted to bribe the drivers of a couple of hansom cabs to permit him and his comrade to take the reins and race to the Arc de Triomphe.

Failing in this, he became profusely autobiographical, informing Neeland of his birth, education, aims, aspirations.

"When I was twelve," he said, "I had known already the happiness of the battle-shock against Kurd, Mongol, and Tartar. At eighteen my ambition was to slap the faces of three human monsters. I told everybody that I was making arrangements to do this, and I started for Brusa after my first monster—Fehim Efendi—but the Vali telegraphed to the Grand Vizier, and the Grand Vizier ran to Abdul the Damned, and Abdul yelled for Sir Nicholas O'Connor; and they caught me in the Pera Palace and handed me over to my Embassy."

Neeland shouted with laughter:

"Who were the other monsters?" he asked.

"The other two whose countenances I desired to slap? Oh, one was Abdul Houda, the Sultan's star-reader, who chattered about my Dark Star horoscope in the Yildiz. And the other was the Sultan."

"Who?"

## THE CAFE DES BULGARS

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"Abdul Hamid."

"What! You wished to slap *his* face?"

"Certainly. But Kutchuk Saïd and Kiamil Pasha requested me not to—accompanied by gendarmes."

"You'd have lost your life," remarked Neeland.

"Yes. But then war would surely have come, and today my Emperor would have held the Dardanelles where the Turkish flag is now flying over German guns and German gunners."

He shook his head:

"Great mistake on my part," he muttered. "Should have pulled Abdul's lop ears. Now, everything in Turkey is 'Yasak' except what Germans do and say; and God knows we are farther than ever from St. Sophia. . . . I'm very thirsty with thinking so much, old fellow. Did you ever drink German champagne?"

"I believe not——"

"Come on, then. You shall drink several gallons and never feel it. It's the only thing German I could ever swallow."

"Prince Erlik, you have had considerable refreshment already."

"*Copain, t'en fais pas!*"

The spectacle of two young fellows in evening dress, in a friendly tug-of-war under the lamp-posts of the Boulevard, amused the passing populace; and Sengoun, noticing this, was inclined to mount a boulevard bench and address the wayfarers, but Neeland pulled him down and persuaded him into a quieter street, the rue Vilna.

"There's a German place, now!" exclaimed Sengoun, delighted.

And Neeland, turning to look, perceived the illuminated sign of the Café des Bulgars.



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German champagne had now become Sengoun's fixed idea; nothing could dissuade him from it, nothing persuade him into a homeward bound taxi. So Neeland, with a rather hazy idea that he ought not to do it, entered the café with Sengoun; and they seated themselves on a leather wall-lounge before one of the numerous marble-topped tables.

"Listen," he said in a low voice to his companion, "this is a German café, and we must be careful what we say. I'm not any too prudent and I may forget this; but don't *you!*"

"Quite right, old fellow!" replied Sengoun, giving him an owlish look. "I must never forget I'm a diplomat among these *sales Boches*——"

"Be careful, Sengoun! That expression is not diplomatic."

"Careful is the word, *mon vieux*," returned the other loudly and cheerfully. "I'll bet you a dollar, three kopeks, and two sous that I go over there and kiss the cashier——"

"No! Be a real diplomat, Sengoun!"

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Neeland, because she's unusually pretty. And we might establish a triple entente until you find some Argive Helen to quadruple it. Aha! Here is our German champagne! Positively the only thing German a Russian can——"

"Listen! This won't do. People are looking at us——"

"Right, old fellow—always right! You know, Neeland, this friendship of ours is the most precious, most delightful, and most inspiring experience of my life. Here's a full goblet to our friendship! Hurrah! As for Enver Pasha, may Erlik seize him!"

After they had honoured the toast, Sengoun looked

## THE CAFE DES BULGARS

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about him pleasantly, receptive, ready for any eventuality. And observing no symptoms of any eventuality whatever, he suggested creating one.

"Dear comrade," he said, "I think I shall arise and make an incendiary address——"

"No!"

"Very well, if you feel that way about it. But there is another way to render the evening agreeable. You see that sideboard?" he continued, pointing to a huge carved buffet piled to the ceiling with porcelain and crystal. "What will you wager that I can not push it over with one hand?"

But Neeland declined the wager with an impatient gesture, and kept his eyes riveted on a man who had just entered the café. He could see only the stranger's well-groomed back, but when, a moment later, the man turned to seat himself, Neeland was not surprised to find himself looking at Doc Curfoot.

"Sengoun," he said under his breath, "that *type* who just came in is an American gambler named Doc Curfoot; and he is here with other gamblers for the purpose of obtaining political information for some government other than my own."

Sengoun regarded the new arrival with amiable curiosity:

"That worm? Oh, well, every city in Europe swarms with such maggots, you know. It would be quite funny if he tries any blandishments on us, wouldn't it?"

"He may. He's a capper. He's looking at us now. I believe he remembers having seen me in the train."

"As for an hour or two at chemin-de-fer, baocarat, or roulette," remarked Sengoun, "I am not averse to a——"

"Watch him! The waiter who is taking his order

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may know who you are—may be telling that gambler. . . . I believe he *did!* Now, let us see what happens. . . .”

Sengoun, delighted at the prospect of an eventuality, blandly emptied his goblet and smiled generally upon everybody.

“I hope he will make our acquaintance and ask us to play,” he said. “I’m very lucky at *chemin-de-fer*. And if I lose I shall conclude that there is trickery. Which would make it very lively for everybody,” he added with a boyish smile. But his dark eyes began to glitter and he showed his beautiful, even teeth when he laughed.

“Ha!” he said. “A little what you call a mix-up might not come amiss! That gives one an appetite; that permits one to perspire; that does good to everybody and makes one sleep soundly! Shall we, as you say in America, start something?”

Neeland, thinking of Ali-Baba and Golden Beard and of their undoubted instigation by telegraph of the morning’s robbery, wondered whether the rendezvous of the robbers might not possibly be here in the *Café des Bulgars*.

The gang of Americans in the train had named Kestner, Breslau, and Weishelm—the one man of the gang whom he had never seen—as prospective partners in this enterprise.

Here, somewhere in this building, were their gambling headquarters. Was there any possible chance that the stolen box and its contents might have been brought here for temporary safety?

Might it not now be hidden somewhere in this very building by men too cunning to risk leaving—the city when every train and every road would be watched

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within an hour of the time that the robbery was committed?

Leaning back carelessly on the lounge and keeping his eyes on the people in the café, Neeland imparted these ideas to Sengoun in a low voice—told him everything he knew in regard to the affair, and asked his opinion.

“My opinion,” said Sengoun, who was enchanted at any prospect of trouble, “is that this house is ‘suspect’ and is worth searching. Of course the Prefect could be notified, arrangements made, and a search by the secret police managed. But, Neeland, my friend, think of what pleasure *we* should be deprived!”

“How do you mean?”

“Why not search the place ourselves?”

“How?”

“Well, of course, we could be picturesque, go to my Embassy, and fill our pockets with automatic pistols, and come back here and—well, make them stand around and see how high they could reach with both hands.”

Neeland laughed.

“That would be a funny jest, wouldn’t it?” said Sengoun.

“Very funny. But——” He nudged Sengoun and directed his attention toward the terrace outside, where waiters were already removing the little iron tables and the chairs, and the few lingering guests were coming inside the café.

“I see,” muttered Sengoun; “it is already Sunday morning, and they’re closing. It’s too late to go to the Embassy. They’d not let us in here when we returned.”

Neeland summoned a waiter with a nod:

“When do you close up inside here?”

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"Tomorrow being Sunday, the terrace closes now, monsieur; but the café remains open all night," explained the waiter with a noticeable German accent.

"Thank you." And, to Sengoun: "I'd certainly like to go upstairs. I'd like to see what it looks like up there—take a glance around."

"Very well, let us go up——"

"We ought to have some excuse——"

"We'll think of several on the way," rising with alacrity, but Neeland pulled him back.

"Wait a moment! It would only mean a fight——"

"All fights," explained Sengoun seriously, "are agreeable—some more so. So if you are ready, dear comrade——"

"But a row will do us no good——"

"Pardon, dear friend, I have been in serious need of one for an hour or two——"

"I don't mean that sort of 'good,'" explained Neeland, laughing. "I mean that I wish to look about up there—explore——"

"Quite right, old fellow—always right! But—here's an idea! I could stand at the head of the stairs and throw them down as they mounted, while you had leisure to look around for your stolen box——"

"My dear Prince Erlik, we've nothing to shoot with, and it's likely they have. There's only one way to get upstairs with any chance of learning anything useful. And that is to start a row between ourselves." And, raising his voice as though irritated, he called for the reckoning, adding in a tone perfectly audible to anybody in the vicinity that he knew where roulette was played, and that he was going whether or not his friend accompanied him.

Sengoun, delighted, recognised his cue and protested

## THE CAFE DES BULGARS

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in loud, nasal tones that the house to which his comrade referred was suspected of unfair play; and a noisy dispute began, listened to attentively by the pretty but brightly painted cashier, the waiters, the *gérant*, and every guest in the neighbourhood.

"As for me," cried Sengoun, feigning to lose his temper, "I have no intention of being tricked. I was not born yesterday—not I! If there is to be found an honest wheel in Paris that would suit me. Otherwise, I go home to bed!"

"It is an honest wheel, I tell you——"

"It is not! I know that place!"

"Be reasonable——"

"Reasonable!" repeated Sengoun appealingly to the people around them. "Permit me to ask these unusually intelligent gentlemen whether it is reasonable to play roulette in a place where the wheel is notoriously controlled and the management a dishonest one! Could a gentleman be expected to frequent or even to countenance places of evil repute? *Messieurs*, I await your verdict!" And he folded his arms dramatically.

Somebody said, from a neighbouring table:

"*Vous avez parfaitement raison, monsieur!*"

"I thank you," cried Sengoun, with an admirably dramatic bow. "Therefore, I shall now go home to bed!"

Neeland, maintaining his gravity with difficulty, followed Sengoun toward the door, still pretending to plead with him; and the *gérant*, a tall, blond, rosy and unmistakable German, stepped forward to unlock the door.

As he laid his hand on the bolt he said in a whisper:

"If the gentlemen desire the privilege of an exclusive

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club where everything is unquestionably conducted——”

“Where?” demanded Neeland, abruptly.

“On the third floor, *monsieur*.”

“Here?”

“Certainly, sir. If the gentlemen will honour me with their names, and will be seated for one little moment, I shall see what can be accomplished.”

“Very well,” said Sengoun, with a short, incredulous laugh. “I’m Prince Erlik, of the Mongol Embassy, and my comrade is Mr. Neeland, Consul General of the United States of America in the Grand Duchy of Gerolstein!”

The *gérant* smiled. After he had gone away toward the further room in the café, Neeland remarked to Sengoun that doubtless their real names were perfectly well known, and Sengoun disdainfully shrugged his indifference:

“What can one expect in this dirty rat-nest of Europe? Abdul the Damned employed one hundred thousand spies in Constantinople alone! And William the Sudden admired him. Why, Neeland, *mon ami*, I never take a step in the streets without being absolutely certain that I am watched and followed. What do I care! Except that towns make me sick. But the only cure is a Khirgiz horse and a thousand lances. God send them. I’m sick of cities.”

A few moments later the *gérant* returned and, in a low voice, requested them to accompany him.

They passed leisurely through the café, between tables where lowered eyes seemed to deny any curiosity; but guests and waiters looked after them after they had passed, and here and there people whispered together—particularly two men who had followed them

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from the sun-dial fountain in the rue Soleil d'Or to the Jardin Russe, across the Place de la Concorde, and into the Café des Bulgars in the rue Vilna.

On the stairs Neeland heard Sengoun still muttering to himself:

“Certainly I am sick of cities and narrow strips of sky. What I need is a thousand lances at a gallop, and a little Kirghiz horse between my knees.”



## CHAPTER XXXII

### THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE

THE suite of rooms into which they were ushered appeared to be furnished in irreproachable taste. Except for the *salon* at the further end of the suite, where play was in progress, the charming apartment might have been a private one; and the homelike simplicity of the room, where books, flowers, and even a big, grey cat confirmed the first agreeable impression, accented the lurking smile on Sengoun's lips.

Doc Curfoot, in evening dress, came forward to receive them, in company with another man, young, nice-looking, very straight, and with the high, square shoulders of a Prussian.

*"Bong soire, mussoors,"* said Curfoot genially. *"J'ai l'honneur de vous faire connaitre mong ami, Mussoor Weishelm."*

They exchanged very serious bows with "Mussoor" Weishelm, and Curfoot retired.

In excellent French Weishelm inquired whether they desired supper; and learning that they did not, bowed smilingly and bade them welcome:

*"You are at home, gentlemen; the house is yours. If it pleases you to sup, we offer you our hospitality; if you care to play, the salon is at your disposal, or, if you prefer, a private room. Yonder is the buffet; there are electric bells at your elbow. You are at home,"* he repeated, clicked his heels together, bowed, and took his leave.

## *THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE*

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Sengoun dropped into a comfortable chair and sent a waiter for caviar, toast, and German champagne.

Neeland lighted a cigarette, seated himself, and looked about him curiously.

Over in a corner on a sofa a rather pretty woman, a cigarette between her jewelled fingers, was reading an evening newspaper. Two others in the adjoining room, young and attractive, their feet on the fireplace fender, conversed together over a sandwich, a glass of the widely advertised Dubonnet, and another of the equally advertised Bon Lait Maggi—as serenely and as comfortably as though they were by their own firesides.

“Perhaps they are,” remarked Sengoun, plastering an oblong of hot toast with caviar. “Birds of this kind nest easily anywhere.”

Neeland continued to gaze toward the *salon* where play was in progress. There did not seem to be many people there. At a small table he recognised Brandes and Stull playing what appeared to be bridge whist with two men whom he had never before seen. There were no women playing.

As he watched the round, expressionless face of Brandes, who was puffing a long cigar screwed tightly into the corner of his thin-lipped mouth, it occurred to him somewhat tardily what Rue Carew had said concerning personal danger to himself if any of these people believed him capable of reconstructing from memory any of the stolen plans.

He had not thought about that specific contingency; instinct alone had troubled him a little when he first entered the *Café des Bulgars*.

However, his unquiet eyes could discover nothing of either Kestner or Breslau; and, somehow, he did not even think of encountering Ilse Dumont in such a place.

## THE DARK STAR

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As for Brandes and Stull, they did not recognise him at all.

So, entirely reassured once more by the absence of Ali-Baba and Golden Beard, and of Scheherazade whom he had no fear of meeting, Neeland ate his caviar with a relish and examined his surroundings.

Of course it was perfectly possible that the stolen papers had been brought here. There were three other floors in the building, too, and he wondered what they were used for.

Sengoun's appetite for conflict waned as he ate and drank; and a violent desire to gamble replaced it.

"You poke about a bit," he said to Neeland. "Talk to that girl over there and see what you can learn. As for me, I mean to start a little flirtation with Mademoiselle Fortuna. Does that suit you?"

If Sengoun wished to play it was none of Neeland's business.

"Do you think it an honest game?" he asked, doubtfully.

"With negligible stakes all first-class gamblers are honest."

"If I were you, Sengoun, I wouldn't drink anything more."

"Excellent advice, old fellow!" emptying his goblet with satisfaction. And, rising to his firm and graceful height, he strolled away toward the *salon* where play progressed amid the most decorous and edifying of atmospheres.

Neeland watched him disappear, then he glanced curiously at the girl on the sofa who was still preoccupied with her newspaper.

So he rose, sauntered about the room examining the few pictures and bronzes, modern but excellent. The

## THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE

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carpet under foot was thick and soft, but, as he strolled past the girl who seemed to be so intently reading, she looked up over her paper and returned his civil recognition of her presence with a slight smile.

As he appeared inclined to linger, she said with pleasant self-possession:

"These newspaper rumours, monsieur, are becoming too persistent to amuse us much longer. War talk is becoming *vieux jeu*."

"Why read them?" inquired Neeland with a smile.

"Why?" She made a slight gesture. "One reads what is printed, I suppose."

"Written and printed by people who know no more about the matter in question than you and I, mademoiselle," he remarked, still smiling.

"That is perfectly true. Why is it worth while for anyone to search for truth in these days when everyone is paid to conceal it?"

"Oh," he said, "not everyone."

"No; some lie naturally and without pay," she admitted indifferently.

"But there are still others. For example, mademoiselle, yourself."

"I?" She laughed, not troubling to refute the suggestion of her possible truthfulness.

He said:

"This—club—is furnished in excellent taste."

"Yes; it is quite new."

"Has it a name?"

"I believe it is called the Cercle Extranationale. Would monsieur also like to know the name of the club cat?"

They both laughed easily, but he could make nothing of her.

## THE DARK STAR

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"Thank you," he said; "and I fear I have interrupted your reading——"

"I have read enough lies; I am quite ready to tell you a few. Shall I?"

"You are most amiable. I have been wondering what the other floors in this building are used for."

"Private apartments," she replied smiling, looking him straight in the eyes. "Now you don't know whether I've told you the truth or not; do you?"

"Of course I know."

"Which, then?"

"The truth."

She laughed and indicated a chair; and he seated himself.

"Who is the dark, nice-looking gentleman accompanying you?" she enquired.

"How could you see him at all through your newspaper?"

"I poked a hole, of course."

"To look at him or at me?"

"Your mirror ought to reassure you. However, as an afterthought, who is he?"

"Prince Erlik, of Mongolia," replied Neeland solemnly.

"I supposed so. We of the infernal aristocracy belong together. I am the Contessa Diabietta d'Enfer."

He inclined gravely:

"I'm afraid I don't belong here," he said. "I'm only a Yankee."

"Hell is full of them," she said, smiling. "All Yankees belong where Prince Erlik and I are at home. . . . Do you play?"

"No. Do you?"

"It depends on chance."

## *THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE*

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"It would give me much pleasure——"

"Thank you, not tonight." And in the same, level, pleasant voice: "Don't look immediately, but from where you sit you can see in the mirror opposite two women seated in the next room."

After a moment he nodded.

"Are they watching us?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Neeland?"

He reddened with surprise.

"Get Captain Sengoun and leave," she said, still smiling. "Do it carelessly, convincingly. Neither of you needs courage; both of you lack common sense. Get up, take leave of me nicely but regretfully, as though I had denied you a rendezvous. You will be killed if you remain here."

For a moment Neeland hesitated, but curiosity won:

"Who is likely to try anything of that sort?" he asked. And a tingling sensation, not wholly unpleasant, passed over him.

"Almost anyone here, if you are recognised," she said, as gaily as though she were imparting delightful information.

"But *you* recognise us. And I'm certainly not dead yet."

"Which ought to tell you more about me than I am likely to tell anybody. Now, when I smile at you and shake my head, make your adieux to me, find Captain Sengoun, and take your departure. Do you understand?"

"Are you really serious?"

"It is you who should be serious. Now, I give you your signal, Monsieur Neeland——"

But the smile stiffened on her pretty face, and at

## THE DARK STAR

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the same moment he was aware that somebody had entered the room and was standing directly behind him.

He turned on his chair and looked up into the face of Ilse Dumont.

There was a second's hesitation, then he was on his feet, greeting her cordially, apparently entirely at ease and with nothing on his mind except the agreeable surprise of the encounter.

"I had your note," he said. "It was charming of you to write, but very neglectful of you not to include your address. Tell me, how have you been since I last saw you?"

Ilse Dumont's red lips seemed to be dry, for she moistened them without speaking. In her eyes he saw peril—knowledge of something terrible—some instant menace.

Then her eyes, charged with lightning, slowly turned from him to the girl on the sofa who had not moved. But in her eyes, too, a little flame began to flicker and play, and the fixed smile relaxed into an expression of cool self-possession.

Neeland's pleasant, careless voice broke the occult tension:

"This is a pretty club," he said; "everything here is in such excellent taste. You might have told me about it," he added to Ilse with smiling reproach; "but you never even mentioned it, and I discovered it quite by accident."

Ilse Dumont seemed to find her voice with an effort:

"May I have a word with you, Mr. Neeland?" she asked.

"Always," he assured her promptly. "I am always more than happy to listen to you——"

"Please follow me!"

## THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE

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He turned to the girl on the sofa and made his adieux with conventional ceremony and a reckless smile which said:

"You were quite right, mademoiselle; I'm in trouble already."

Then he followed Ilse Dumont into the adjoining room, which was lined with filled bookcases and where the lounges and deep chairs were covered with leather.

Halting by the library table, Ilse Dumont turned to him—turned on him a look such as he never before had encountered in any living woman's eyes—a dead gaze, dreadful, glazed, as impersonal as the fixed regard of a corpse.

She said:

"I came. . . . They sent for me. . . . I did not believe they had the right man. . . . I could not believe it, Neeland."

A trifle shaken, he said in tones which sounded steady enough:

"What frightens you so, Scheherazade?"

"Why did you come? Are you absolutely mad?"

"Mad? No, I don't think so," he replied with a forced smile. "What threatens me here, Scheherazade?"—regarding her pallid face attentively.

"Death. . . . You must have known it when you came."

"Death? No, I didn't know it."

"Did you suppose that if they could get hold of you they'd let you go?—A man who might carry in his memory the plans for which they tried to kill you? I wrote to you—I wrote to you to go back to America! And—*this* is what you have done instead!"

"Well," he said in a pleasant but rather serious



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voice, "if you really believe there is danger for me if I remain here, perhaps I'd better go."

"You *can't* go!"

"You think I'll be stopped?"

"Yes. Who is your crazy companion? I heard that he is Alak Sengoun—the headlong fool—they call Prince Erlik. Is it true?"

"Where did you hear all these things?" he demanded. "Where were you when you heard them?"

"At the Turkish Embassy. Word came that they had caught you. I did not believe it; others present doubted it. . . . But as the rumour concerned *you*, I took no chances; I came instantly. I—I had rather be dead than see you here——" Her voice became unsteady, but she controlled it at once:

"Neeland! Neeland! Why did you come? Why have you undone all I tried to do for you——?"

He looked intently at Ilse Dumont, then his gaze swept the handsome suite of rooms. No one seemed to notice him; in perspective, men moved leisurely about the further *salon*, where play was going on; and there seemed to be no one else in sight. And, as he stood there, free, in full pride and vigour of youth and strength, he became incredulous that anything could threaten him which he could not take care of.

A smile grew in his eyes, confident, humorous, a little hint of tenderness in it:

"Scheherazade," he said, "you are a dear. You pulled me out of a dreadful mess on the *Volhynia*. I offer you gratitude, respect, and the very warm regard for you which I really cherish in my heart."

He took her hands, kissed them, looked up half laughing, half in earnest.

## THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE

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"If you're worried," he said, "I'll find Captain Sengoun and we'll depart——"

She retained his hands in a convulsive clasp:

"Oh, Neeland! Neeland! There are men below who will never let you pass! And Breslau and Kestner are coming here later. And that devil, Damat Mahmud Bey!"

"Golden Beard and Ali Baba and the whole Arabian Nights!" exclaimed Neeland. "Who is Damat Mahmud Bey, Scheherazade dear?"

"The shadow of Abdul Hamid."

"Yes, dear child, but Abdul the Damned is shut up tight in a fortress!"

"His shadow dogs the spurred heels of Enver Pasha," she said, striving to maintain her composure. "Oh, Neeland!—A hundred thousand Armenians are yet to die in that accursed shadow! And do you think Mahmud Damat will hesitate in regard to *you*?"

"Nonsense! Does a murderous Moslem go about Paris killing people he doesn't happen to fancy? Those things aren't done——"

"Have you and Sengoun any weapons at all?" she interrupted desperately, "Anything!—A sword cane——?"

"No. What the devil does all this business mean?" he broke out impatiently. "What's all this menace of lawlessness—this impudent threat of interference——"

"It is *war*!"

"War?" he repeated, not quite understanding her.

She caught him by the arm:

"War!" she whispered; "War! Do you understand? They don't care what they do now! They mean to kill you here in this place. They'll be out of France before anybody finds you."

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"Has war actually been declared?" he asked, astounded.

"Tomorrow! It is known in certain circles!" She dropped his arm and clasped her hands and stood there twisting them, white, desperate, looking about her like a hunted thing.

"Why did you do this?" she repeated in an agonised voice. "What can I do? I'm no traitor! . . . But I'd give you a pistol if I had one——" She checked herself as the girl who had been reading an evening newspaper on a sofa, and to whom Neeland had been talking when Ilse Dumont entered, came sauntering into the room.

The eyes of both women met; both turned a trifle paler. Then Ilse Dumont walked slowly up to the other:

"I overheard your warning," she said with a deadly stare.

"Really?"

Ilse stretched out her bare arm, palm upward, and closed the fingers tightly:

"I hold your life in my hand. I have only to speak. Do you understand?"

"No."

"You are lying. You *do* understand. You take double wages; but it is not France you betray! Nor Russia!"

"Are you insane?"

"Almost. *Where do you carry them?*"

"What?"

"Answer quickly. *Where?* I tell you, I'll expose you in another moment if you don't answer me! Speak quickly!"

The other woman had turned a ghastly white; for a second or two she remained dumb, then, dry-lipped:

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"Above—the knee," she stammered; but there was scarcely a sound from the blanched lips that formed the words.

"Pistols?"

"Yes."

"Loaded? Both of them?"

"Yes."

"Clips?"

"No."

"Unstrap them!"

The woman turned, bent almost double, twisting her supple body entirely around; but Ilse Dumont was at her side like a flash and caught her wrist as she withdrew her hand from the hem of her fluffy skirt.

"Now—*take* your life!" said Ilse Dumont between her teeth. "There's the door! Go out!"—following her with blazing eyes—"Stop! Stand where you are until I come!"

Then she came quickly to where Neeland stood, astonished; and thrust two automatic pistols into his hands.

"Get Sengoun," she whispered. "Don't go *down*-stairs, for God's sake. Get to the roof, if you can. Try—oh, try, try, Neeland, my friend!" Her voice trembled; she looked into his eyes—gave him, in that swift regard, all that a woman withholds until the right man asks.

Her lips quivered; she turned sharply on her heel, went to the outer hallway, where the other woman stood motionless.

"What am I to do with *you*?" demanded Ilse Dumont. "Do you think you are going out of here to summon the police? Mount those stairs!"

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The woman dropped her hand on the banisters, heavily, set foot on the first stair, then slowly mounted as though her little feet in their dainty evening slippers were weighted with ball and chain.

Ilse Dumont followed her, opened a door in the passage, motioned her to enter. It was a bedroom that the electric light revealed. The woman entered and stood by the bed as though stupefied.

"I'll keep my word to you," said Ilse Dumont. "When it becomes too late for you to do us any mischief, I'll return and let you go."

And she stepped back across the threshold and locked the door on the outside.

As she did so, Neeland and Sengoun came swiftly up the stairs, and she beckoned them to follow, gathered the skirts of her evening gown into one hand, and ran up the stairs ahead of them to the fifth floor.

In the dim light Neeland saw that the top floor was merely a vast attic full of debris from the café on the ground floor—iron tables which required mending or repainting, iron chairs, great jars of artificial stone with dead baytrees standing in them, parts of rusty stoves and kitchen ranges, broken cutlery in boxes, cracked table china and heavier kitchen crockery in tubs which once had held flowers.

The only windows gave on a court. Through their dirty panes already the grey light of that early Sunday morning glimmered, revealing the contents of the shadowy place, and the position of an iron ladder hooked to two rings under the scuttle overhead.

Ilse Dumont laid her finger on her lips, conjuring silence, then, clutching her silken skirts, she started up the iron ladder, reached the top, and, exerting all her

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strength, lifted the hinged scuttle leading to the leads outside.

Instantly somebody challenged her in a guttural voice. She stood there a few moments in whispered conversation, then, from outside, somebody lowered the scuttle cover; the girl locked it, descended the iron ladder backwards, and came swiftly across to where Neeland and Sengoun were standing, pistols lifted.

"They're guarding the roof," she whispered, "—two men. It is hopeless, that way."

"The proper way," said Sengoun calmly, "is for us to shoot our way out of this!"

The girl turned on him in a passion:

"Do you suppose I care what happens to *you*?" she said. "If there were no one else to consider you might do as you pleased, for all it concerns me!"

Sengoun reddened:

"Be silent, you treacherous little cat!" he retorted. "Do you imagine your riffraff are going to hold *me* here when I'm ready to depart! *Me!* A free Cossack! Bah!"

"Don't talk that way, Sengoun," said Neeland sharply. "We owe these pistols to her."

"Oh," muttered Sengoun, shooting a menacing glance at her. "I didn't understand that." Then his scowl softened and a sudden laugh cleared his face.

"I'm sorry, mademoiselle," he said. "You're quite welcome to your low opinion of me. But if anyone should ask me, I'd say that I don't understand what is happening to us. And after a while I'll become angry and go downstairs for information."

"They know nothing about you in the *salle de jeu*," she said, "but on the floor below they're waiting to kill you."

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Neeland, astonished, asked her whether the American gamblers in the *salon* where Sengoun had been playing were ignorant of what was going on in the house.

"What Americans?" she demanded, incredulously. "Do you mean Weishelm?"

"Didn't you know there were Americans employed in the *salle de jeu*?" asked Neeland, surprised.

"No. I have not been in this house for a year until I came tonight. This place is maintained by the Turkish Government—" She flashed a glance at Sengoun—"you're welcome to the information now," she added contemptuously. And then, to Neeland: "There was, I believe, some talk in New York about adding one or two Americans to the personnel, but I opposed it."

"They're here," said Neeland drily.

"Do you know who they are?"

"Yes. There's a man called Doc Curfoot—"

"Who!"

And suddenly, for the first time, Neeland remembered that she had been the wife of one of the men below.

"Brandes and Stull are the others," he said mechanically.

The girl stared at him as though she did not comprehend, and she passed one hand slowly across her forehead and eyes.

"Eddie Brandes? *Here?* And Stull? Curfoot? *Here in this house!*"

"In the *salon* below."

"They *can't* be!" she protested in an odd, colourless voice. "They were bought soul and body by the British Secret Service!"

All three stood staring at one another; the girl flushed, clenched her hand, then let it fall by her side as though utterly overcome.

## *THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE*

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“All this espionage!” cried Sengoun, furiously. “—It makes me sick, I tell you! Where everybody betrays everybody is no place for a free Cossack!—”

The terrible expression on the girl’s face checked him; she said, slowly:

“It is we others who have been betrayed, it seems. It is *wæ* who are trapped here. They’ve got us all—every one of us. Oh, my God!—every one of us—at last!”

She lifted her haggard face and stared at the increasing light which was turning the window panes a sickly yellow.

“With sunrise comes war,” she said in a stunned voice, as though to convince herself. “We are caught here in this house. And Kestner and Weishelm and Breslau and I——” she trembled, framing her burning face in slim hands that were like ice. “Do you understand that Brandes and Curfoot, bought by England, have contracted to deliver us to a French court martial?”

The men looked at her in silence.

“Kestner and Breslau knew they had been bought. One of our own people witnessed that treachery. But we never dreamed that these traitors would venture into this house tonight. We should have come here ourselves instead of going to the Turkish Embassy. That was Mahmud Damat’s meddling! His messenger insisted. God! What a mistake! What a deathly mistake for all of us!”

She leaned for a moment against one of the iron pillars which supported the attic roof, and covered her face with her hands.

After a moment, Neeland said:

“I don’t understand why you can’t leave this house



## THE DARK STAR

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if you are in danger. You say that there are men downstairs who are waiting to kill us—waiting only for Kestner and Breslau and Mahmud Damat to arrive.”

She said faintly:

“I did not before understand Mahmud’s delay. Now, I understand. He has been warned. Breslau and Kestner will not come. Otherwise, you now would be barricaded behind that breastwork of rubbish, fighting for your lives.”

“But you say there are men on the stairs below who are ready to kill us if we try to leave the house.”

“They, too, are trapped without knowing it. War will come with sunrise. This house has been under surveillance since yesterday afternoon. They have not closed in on us yet, because they are leaving the trap open in hopes of catching us all. They are waiting for Breslau and Kestner and Mahmud Damat. . . . But they’ll never come, now. . . . They are out of the city by this time. . . . I know them. They are running for their lives at this hour. . . . And we—we lesser ones—caught here—trapped—reserved for a French court martial and a firing squad in a barrack square!”

She shuddered and pressed her hands over her temples.

Neeland said:

“I am going to stand by you. Captain Sengoun will do the same.”

She shook her head:

“No use,” she said with a shiver. “I am too well known. They have my *dossier* almost complete. My *procès* will be a brief one.”

“Can’t you get away by the roof? There are two of your men up there.”

## THE CERCLE EXTRANATIONALE

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"They themselves are caught, and do not even know it. They too will face a squad of execution before the sun rises tomorrow. And they never dream of it up there——"

She made a hopeless gesture:

"What is the use! When I came here from the Turkish Embassy, hearing that you were here but believing the information false, I discovered you conversing with a Russian spy—overheard her warn you to leave this house.

"And there, all the while, unknown to me, in the *salle de jeu* were Curfoot and that unspeakable scoundrel Brandes! Why, the place was swarming with enemies—and I never dreamed it! . . . Yet—I might have feared some such thing—I might have feared that the man, Brandes, who had betrayed me once, would do it again if he ever had the chance. . . . And he's done it."

There was a long silence. Ilse stood staring at the melancholy greyish light on the window panes.

She said as though to herself:

"I shall never see another daybreak." . . . After a moment she turned and began to pace the attic, a strange, terrible figure of haggard youth in the shadowy light. "How horribly still it is at daybreak!" she breathed, halting before Neeland. "How deathly quiet——"

The dry crack of a pistol cut her short. Then, instantly, in the dim depths of the house, shot followed shot in bewildering succession, faster, faster, filling the place with a distracting tumult.

Neeland jerked up his pistol as a nearer volley rattled out on the landing directly underneath.

Sengoun, exasperated, shouted:

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“Well, what the devil is all this!” and ran toward the head of the stairs, his pistol lifted for action.

Then, in the garret doorway, Weishelm appeared, his handsome face streaming blood. He staggered, turned mechanically toward the stairs again with wavering revolver; but a shot drove him blindly backward and another hurled him full length across the floor, where he lay with both arms spread out, and the last tremors running from his feet to his twitching face.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A RAT HUNT

THE interior of the entire house was now in an uproar; shots came fast from every landing; the semi-dusk of stair-well and corridor was lighted by incessant pistol flashes and the whole building echoed the deafening racket.

"What do you make of it?" shouted Sengoun furiously, standing like a baited and perplexed bull. "Who's fighting who in this fool of a place? By Erlik! I'd like to know whom I'm to fire at!"

Ilse Dumont, creeping along the wall, looked fearfully down at Weishelm who no longer moved where he lay on the dusty floor, with eyes and mouth open and his distorted face already half covered by a wet and crawling scarlet mask.

"Brandes and Stull are betraying us," she whispered. "They are killing my comrades—on the stairs down there——"

"If that is true," called out Neeland in a low, cautious voice, "you'd better wait a moment, Sengoun!"

But Sengoun's rage for combat had already filled him to overflowing, and the last rag of patience left him.

"I don't care who is fighting!" he bellowed. "It's all one to me! Now is the time to shoot our way out of this. Come on, Neeland! Hurrah for the Terek Cossacks! Another town taken! Hurrah!"

Neeland caught Ilse by the wrist:

## THE DARK STAR

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"You'd better get free of this house while you can!" he said, dragging her with him after Sengoun, who had already reached the head of the stairs and was starting down, peering about for a target.

Suddenly, on the landing below, Golden Beard and Ali Baba appeared, caught sight of Sengoun and Neeland above, and opened fire on them instantly, driving them back from the head of the staircase flat against the corridor wall. But Golden Beard, seeming to realise now that the garret landing was held and the way to the roof cut off, began to retreat from the foot of the garret stairs with Ali Baba following, their restless, upward-pointed pistols searching for the slightest movement in the semi-obscurity of the hallway above.

Sengoun, fuming and fretting, had begun to creep toward the head of the stairs again, when there came a rattling hail of shots from below, a rush, the trample of feet, the crash of furniture and startling slam of a door.

Downstairs straight toward the uproar ran Sengoun with Neeland beside him. The halls were swimming in acrid fumes; the floors trembled and shook under the shock as a struggling, fighting knot of men went tumbling down the stairway below, reached the landing and burst into the rooms of the Cercle Extranationale.

Leaning over the banisters, Neeland saw Golden Beard turn on Doc Curfoot, raging, magnificent as a Viking, his blue eyes ablaze. He hurled his empty pistol at the American; seized chairs, bronzes, andirons, the clock from the mantel, and sent a storm of heavy missiles through the doorway among the knot of men who were pressing him and who had already seized Ali Baba.

Then, from the banisters above, Neeland and Sen-

## A RAT HUNT

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goun saw Brandes, moving stealthily, swiftly, edge his way to a further door.

Steadying the elbow of his pistol hand in the hollow cup of his left palm, his weapon level, swerving as his quarry moved, he presently fired at Golden Beard and got him through the back. And then he shot him again deliberately, through the body, as the giant turned, made a menacing gesture toward him; took an uncertain step in his direction; another step, wavering, blindly grotesque; then stood swaying there under the glare of the partly shattered chandelier from which hung long shreds of crystal prisms.

And Brandes, aiming once more with methodical and merciless precision, and taking what time he required to make a bull's-eye on this great, reeling, golden-crowned bull, fired the third shot at his magnificent head.

The bronze Barye lion dropped from Golden Beard's nerveless fist; the towering figure, stiffening, fell over rather slowly and lay across the velvet carpet as rigid as a great tree.

Brandes went into the room, leaned over the dying man and fired into his body until his pistol was empty. Then he replaced the exhausted clip leisurely, leering down at his victim.

There was a horrid sound from the stairs, where Curfoot and another man were killing a waiter. Strange, sinister faces appeared everywhere from the smoke-filled club rooms; Stull came out into the hallway below and shouted up through the stair-well:

"Say, Eddie! For Christ's sake come down here! There's a mob outside on the street and they're tearing the iron shutters off the café!"

Curfoot immediately started downstairs; Brandes, pistol in hand, came slowly out of the club rooms, still

## THE DARK STAR

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leering, his slitted, greenish eyes almost phosphorescent in the semi-obscurity.

Suddenly he caught sight of Ilse Dumont standing close behind Sengoun and Neeland on the landing above.

"By God!" he shouted to Curfoot. "Here she is, Doc! Tell your men! Tell them she's up here on the next floor!"

Sengoun immediately fired at Brandes, who did not return the shot but went plunging downstairs into the smoky obscurity below.

"Come on!" roared Sengoun to Neeland, starting forward with levelled weapon. "They've all gone crazy and it's time we were getting out of this!"

"Quick!" whispered Neeland to Ilse Dumont. "Follow me downstairs! It's the only chance for you now!"

But the passageway was blocked by a struggling, cursing, panting crowd, and they were obliged to retreat into the club rooms.

In the *salle de jeu*, Ali Baba, held fast by three men dressed as waiters, suddenly tripped up two of them, turned, and leaped for the doorway. The two men who had been tripped scrambled to their feet and tore after him. When they reached the hallway the Eurasian was gone; but all of a sudden there came the crash of a splintered door from the landing above; and the dim corridor rang with the frightful screaming of a woman.

"It's—that—that—Russian girl!" stammered Ilse Dumont; "—The girl I locked in! Oh, my God!—my God! Karl Breslau is killing her!"

Neeland sprang into the hall and leaped up the stairs; but the three men disguised as waiters had arrived before him.

And there, across the threshold of the bedroom, backed up flat against the shattered door, Ali Baba

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was already fighting for his life; and the frightened Russian girl crept out from the bedroom behind him and ran to Neeland for protection.

Twice Neeland aimed at Ali Baba, but could not bring himself to fire at the bleeding, rabid object which snarled and slavered and bit and kicked, regardless of the blows raining on him. At last one of his assailants broke the half demented creature's arm with a chair; and the bloody, battered thing squeaked like a crippled rat and darted away amid the storm of blows descending, limping and floundering up the attic stairs, his broken arm flapping with every gasping bound.

After him staggered his sweating and exhausted assailants, reeling past Neeland and Ilse Dumont and the terrified Russian girl who crouched behind them. But, halfway up the stairs all three halted and stood clinging to the banisters as though listening to something on the floor above them.

Neeland heard it, too: from the roof came a ripping, splintering sound, as though people on the slates were prying up the bolted scuttle. The three men on the stairs hesitated a moment longer; then turned to flee, too late; a hail of pistol shots swept the attic stairs; all three men came pitching and tumbling down to the landing.

Two of them lay still; one rose immediately and limped on again down the hallway, calling over the banisters to those below:

"The Germans on the leads 'ave busted into the garret! Breslau is up 'ere! Send along those American gunmen, or somebody what can shoot!"

He was a grey-haired Englishman, smooth shaven and grim; and, as he stood there at the head of the



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further stairs, breathing heavily, awaiting aid from below, he said to Neeland coolly enough:

"You'd better go below, sir. We 'ad our orders to take this Breslau rat alive, but we can't do it now, and there's like to be a 'orrid mess 'ere directly."

"Can we get through below?"

"*You* can," said the man significantly, "but they'll be detaining one o' them ladies at the door."

"Do you mean me?" said Ilse Dumont.

"Yes, ma'am, I do——"

She sprang toward the attic stairway, but the British agent whipped out a pistol and covered her.

"No," he said grimly. "You're wanted below. Go down!"

She came slowly back to where Neeland was standing.

"You'll have to take your chance below," he said under his breath. "I'll stand by you to the end."

She smiled and continued on toward the stairs where the English agent stood. Neeland and the Russian girl followed her.

The agent said:

"There's 'ell to pay below, sir."

The depths of the house rang with the infernal din of blows falling on iron shutters. A deeper, more sinister roar rose from the mob outside. There was a struggle going on inside the building, too; Neeland could hear the trampling and surging of men on every floor—voices calling from room to room, shouts of anger, the terrible outcry of a man in agony.

"Wot a rat's nest, then, there was in this here blessed 'ouse, sir!" said the British agent, coolly. "If we get Breslau and the others on the roof we've bagged 'em all."

The Russian girl was trembling so violently that

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Neeland took her by the arm. But Ilse Dumont, giving her a glance of contempt, moved calmly past the British agent to the head of the stairway.

"Come," she said to Neeland.

The agent, leaning over the banisters, shouted to a man on the next floor:

"Look sharp below there! I'm sendin' Miss Dumont down with Mr. Neeland, the American! Take her in charge, Bill!"

"Send her along!" bawled the man, framing his face with both hands. "Keep Breslau on the roof a bit and we'll 'ave the beggar in a few moments!"

Somebody else shouted up from the tumult below:

"It's war, 'Arry! 'Ave you 'eard? It's war this morning! Them 'Uns 'as declared war! And the perlice is a-killin' of the Apaches all over Paris!"

Ilse Dumont looked curiously at the agent, calmly at Neeland, then, dropping one hand on the banisters, she went lightly down the stairs toward the uproar below, followed by Neeland and the Russian girl clinging to his arm with both desperate little hands.

The British agent hung far over the banisters until he saw his colleague join them on the floor below; then, reassured, and on guard again, he leaned back against the corridor wall, his pistol resting on his thigh, and fixed his cold grey eyes on the attic stairs once more.

The secret agent who now joined Neeland and Ilse Dumont on the fourth floor had evidently been constructing a barricade across the hallway as a precaution in case of a rush from the Germans on the roof.

Chairs and mattresses, piled shoulder high, obstructed the passageway, blocking the stairs; and the secret agent—a very young man with red hair and in the garb of a waiter—clambered over it, revolver in

## **THE DARK STAR**

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one hand, a pair of handcuffs in the other. He lost his balance on top of the shaky heap; strove desperately to recover it, scrambled like a cat in a tub, stumbled, rolled over on a mattress.

And there Neeland pinned him, closing his mouth with one hand and his throat with the other, while Ilse Dumont tore weapon and handcuffs from his grasp, snapped the latter over his wrists, snatched the case from a bedroom pillow lying among the mattresses, and, with Neeland's aid, swathed the struggling man's head in it.

"Into that clothes-press!" whispered Ilse, pointing along the hallway where a door swung open.

"Help me lift him!" motioned Neeland.

Together they got him clear of the shaky barricade and, lugging him between them, deposited him on the floor of the clothes-press and locked the door.

So silent had they been that, listening, they heard no movement from the watcher on the floor above, who stood guard at the attic stairs. And it was evident he had heard nothing to make him suspicious.

The Russian girl, dreadfully pale, leaned against the wall as though her limbs scarcely supported her. Neeland passed his arm under hers, nodded to Ilse Dumont, and started cautiously down the carpeted stairs, his automatic pistol in one hand, and the revolver taken from the imprisoned secret agent clutched tightly in the other.

Down the stairs they crept, straight toward the frightful tumult still raging below—down past the wrecked club rooms; past a dead man sprawling on the landing across the blood-soaked carpet—down into the depths of the dusky building toward the lighted café floor whence came the uproar of excited men, while,

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from the street outside, rose the frantic yelling of the mob mingled with the crash of glass and the clanging dissonance of iron grilles and shutters which were being battered into fragments.

"It's my chance, now!" whispered Ilse Dumont, slipping past him like a shadow.

For a moment he saw her silhouetted against the yellow electric glare on the stairs below, then, half carrying the almost helpless Russian girl, he stumbled down the last flight of stairs and pushed his way through a hurrying group of men who seemed to be searching for something, for they were tearing open cupboards and buffets, dragging out table drawers and tumbling linen, crockery, and glassware all over the black and white marble floor.

The whole place was ankle deep in shattered glass and broken bottles, and the place reeked with smoke and the odour of wine and spirits.

Neeland forced his way forward into the café, looked around for Sengoun, and saw him almost immediately.

The young Russian, flushed, infuriated, his collar gone and his coat in tatters, was struggling with some men who held both his arms but did not offer to strike him.

Behind him, crowded back into a corner near the cashier's steel-grilled desk, stood Ilse Dumont, calm, disdainful, confronted by Brandes, whose swollen, greenish eyes, injected with blood, glared redly at her. Stull had hold of him and was trying to drag him away:

"For God's sake, Eddie, shut your mouth," he pleaded in English. "You can't do *that* to her, whatever she done to you?"

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But Brandes, disengaging himself with a jerk, pushed his way past Sengoun to where Ilse stood.

"I've got the goods on *you!*" he said in a ferocious voice that neither Stull nor Curfoot recognised. "You know what you did to me, don't you! You took my wife from me! Yes, my *wife!* She *was* my wife! She *is* my wife!—For all you did, you lying, treacherous slut!—For all you've done to break me, double-cross me, ruin me, drive me out of every place I went! And now I've got you! I've sold you out! Get that? And you know what they'll do to you, don't you? Well, you'll see when——"

Curfoot and Stull threw themselves against him, but Brandes, his round face pasty with fury, struggled back again to confront Ilse Dumont.

"Ruined me!" he repeated. "Took away from me the only thing God ever gave me for my own! Took my wife!"

"You dog!" said Ilse Dumont very slowly. "You dirty dog!"

A frightful spasm crossed Brandes' features, and Stull snatched at the pistol he had whipped out. There was a struggle; Brandes wrenched the weapon free; but Neeland tore his way past Curfoot and struck Brandes in the face with the butt of his heavy revolver.

Instantly the group parted right and left; Sengoun suddenly twisted out of the clutches of the men who held him, sprang upon Curfoot, and jerked the pistol from his fist. At the same moment the entire front of the café gave way and the mob crashed inward with a roar amid the deafening din of shattered metal and the clash of splintering glass.

Through the dust and falling shower of debris, Brandes fired at Ilse Dumont, reeled about in the whirl of

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the intrushing throng engulfing him, still firing blindly at the woman who had been his wife.

Neeland put a bullet into his pistol arm, and it fell. But Brandes stretched it out again with a supreme effort, pointing at Ilse Dumont with jewelled and bloody fingers:

“That woman is a German spy! A spy!” he screamed. “You damn French mutts, do you understand what I say! Oh, my God! Will someone who speaks French tell them! Will somebody tell them she’s a spy! *La femme! Cette femme!*” he shrieked. “*Elle est espion! Esp——!*” He fired again, with his left hand. Then Sengoun shot him through the head; and at the same moment somebody stabbed Curfoot in the neck; and the lank American gambler turned and cried out to Stull in a voice half strangled with pain and fury:

“Look out, Ben. There are apaches in this mob! That one in the striped jersey knifed me——”

“*Tiens, v’la pour toi, sale mec de malheur!*” muttered a voice at his elbow, and a blow from a slung-shot crushed the base of his skull.

As Curfoot crumpled up, Stull caught him; but the tall gambler’s dead weight bore Stull to his knees among the fierce apaches.

And there, fighting in silence to the end, his chalky face of a sick clown meeting undaunted the overwhelming odds against him, Stull was set upon by the apaches and stabbed and stabbed until his clothing was a heap of ribbons and the watch and packet of French bank-notes which the assassins tore from his body were dripping with his blood.

Sengoun and Neeland, their evening clothes in tatters, hatless, dishevelled, began shooting their way out

## A RAT HUNT

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An immense wave of people surged suddenly across the rue Vilna, headed toward the German cafés on the Boulevard; and then, for the first time, Neeland caught sight of policemen standing in little groups, coolly watching the destruction of the Café des Bulgars.

Either they were too few to cope with the mob, or they were indifferent as to what was being done to a German café, but one thing was plain; the police had not the faintest idea that murder had been rampant in the place. For, when suddenly a dead body was thrown from the door out on the sidewalk, their police whistles shrilled through the street, and they started for the mob, resolutely, pushing, striking with white-gloved fists, shouting for right of way.

Other police came running, showing that they had been perfectly aware that German cafés were being attacked and wrecked. A mounted inspector forced his horse along the swarming sidewalk, crying:

*"Allons! Circulez! C'est défendu de s'attrouper dans la rue! Mais fichez-moi le camp, nom de Dieu! Les Allemands ne sont pas encore dans la place!"*

Along the street and on the Boulevard mobs were forming and already storming three other German cafés; a squadron of Republican Guard cavalry arrived at a trot, their helmets glittering in the increasing daylight, driving before them a mob which had begun to attack a café on the corner.

A captain, superbly mounted, rode ahead of the advancing line of horses, warning the throng back into the rue Vilna, up which the mob now recoiled, sullenly protesting.

Neeland and Sengoun and the two women were forced back with the crowd as a double rank of steel-helmeted

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twice more after the running man, and dropped him at the second shot.

"A good business, too," he said calmly, winking at Neeland. "You *bourgeois* ought to be glad that we're ordered to clean up Paris for you. And now is the time to do it," he added, reloading his weapon.

Sengoun said in a low voice to Neeland:

"They're ridding the city of apaches. It's plain enough that they have orders to kill them where they find them! Look!" he added, pointing to the dead wall across the street; "It's here at last, and Paris is cleaning house and getting ready for it! This is war, Neeland—war at last!"

Neeland looked across the street where, under a gas lamp on a rusty iron bracket, was pasted the order for general mobilisation. And on the sidewalk at the base of the wall lay a man, face downward, his dusty shoes crossed under the wide flaring trousers, the greasy *casquet* still crowding out his lop ears; his hand clenched beside a stiletto which lay on the stone flagging beside him.

"An apache," said Sengoun coolly. "That's right, too. It's the way we do in Russia when we clean house for war——"

His face reddened and lighted joyously.

"Thank God for my thousand lances!" he said, lifting his eyes to the yellowing sky between the houses in the narrow street. "Thank God! Thank God!"

Now, across the intersections of streets and alleys beyond where they stood, policemen and Garde cavalry were shooting into doorways, basements, and up the sombre, dusky lanes, the dry crack of their service revolvers re-echoing noisily through the street.

Toward the Boulevard below, a line of police and of



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cavalrymen blocked the rue Vilna; and, beyond them, the last of the mob was being driven from the *Café des Bulgars*, where the first ambulances were arriving and the police, guarding the ruins, were already looking out of windows on the upper floors.

A cavalryman came clattering down the rue Vilna, gesticulating and calling out to Sengoun and Neeland to take their ladies and depart.

"Get us a taxicab—there's a good fellow!" cried Sengoun in high spirits; and the cavalryman, looking at their dishevelled attire, laughed and nodded as he rode ahead of them down the rue Vilna.

There were several taxicabs on the Boulevard, their drivers staring up at the wrecked café. As Neeland spoke to the driver of one of the cabs, Ilse Dumont stepped back beside the silent girl whom she had locked in the bedroom.

"I gave *you* a chance," she said under her breath. "What may I expect from you? Answer me quickly!—What am I to expect?"

The girl seemed dazed:

"N-nothing," she stammered. "The—the horror of that place—the killing—has sickened me. I—I want to go home——"

"You do not intend to denounce me?"

"No—Oh, God! No!"

"Is that the truth? If you are lying to me it means my death."

The girl gazed at her in horror; tears sprang to her eyes:

"I couldn't—I couldn't!" she stammered in a choking voice. "I've never before seen death—never seen how it came—how men die! This—this killing is horrible, revolting!" She had laid one trembling little

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hand on Ilse Dumont's bare shoulder. "I don't want to have you killed; the idea of death makes me ill! I'm going home—that is all I ask for—to go home——"

She dropped her pretty head and began to sob hysterically, standing there under the growing daylight of the Boulevard, in her tattered evening gown.

Suddenly Ilse Dumont threw both arms around her and kissed the feverish, tear-wet face:

"You weren't meant for this!" she whispered. "You do it for money. Go home. Do anything else for wages—anything except this!—*Anything*, I tell you——"

Neeland's hand touched her arm:

"I have a cab. Are you going home with her?"

"I dare not," she said.

"Then will you take this Russian girl to her home, Sengoun?" he asked. And added in a low voice: "She is one of your own people, you know."

"All right," said Sengoun blissfully. "I'd take the devil home if you asked me! Besides, I can talk to her about my regiment on the way. That will be wonderful, Neeland! That will be quite wonderful! I can talk to her in Russian about my regiment all the way home!"

He laughed and looked at his friend, at Ilse Dumont, at the drooping figure he was to take under his escort. He glanced down at his own ragged attire where he stood hatless, collarless, one sleeve of his evening coat ripped open to the shoulder.

"Isn't it wonderful!" he cried, bursting out into uncontrollable laughter. "Neeland, my dear comrade, this has been the most delightfully wonderful night of my entire life! But the great miracle is still to come! Hurrah for a thousand lances! Hurrah! Town taken by Prince Erlik! Hurrah!"

And he seized the young girl whom he was to escort

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to her home—wherever that hazy locality might be—and carried her in his arms to the taxicab, amid encouraging shouts of laughter from the line of cavalymen who had been watching the proceedings from the corner of the rue Vilna.

That shout of Gallic appreciation inflamed Sengoun: he reached for his hat, to lift and wave it, but found no hat on his head. So he waved his tattered sleeve instead:

“Hurrah for France!” he shouted. “Hurrah for Russia! I’m Sengoun, of the Terek!—And I am to have a thousand lances with which to explain to the Germans my opinion of them and of their Emperor!”

The troopers cheered him from their stirrups, in spite of their officers, who pretended to check their men.

“*Vive la France! Vive la Russie!*” they roared. “Forward the Terek Cossacks!”

Sengoun turned to Ilse Dumont:

“Madame,” he said, “in gratitude and admiration!”—and he gracefully saluted her hand. Then, to his comrade: “Neeland!”—seizing both the American’s hands. “Such a night and such a comrade I shall never forget! I adore our night together; I love you as a brother. I shall see you before I go?”

“Surely, Sengoun, my dear comrade!”

“*Alors—au revoir!*” He sprang into the taxicab. “To the Russian Embassy!” he called out; and turned to the half fainting girl on the seat beside him.

“Where do you live, my dear?” he asked very gently, taking her icy hand in his.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### SUNRISE

WHEN the taxicab carrying Captain Sengoun and the unknown Russian girl had finally disappeared far away down the Boulevard in the thin grey haze of early morning, Neeland looked around him; and it was a scene unfamiliar, unreal, that met his anxious eyes.

The sun had not yet gilded the chimney tops; east and west, as far as he could see, the Boulevard stretched away under its double line of trees between ranks of closed and silent houses, lying still and mysterious in the misty, bluish-grey light.

Except for police and municipal guards, and two ambulances moving slowly away from the ruined café across the street, the vast Boulevard was deserted; no taxicabs remained; no omnibuses moved; no early workmen passed, no slow-moving farm wagons and milk wains from the suburbs; no *chiffonniers* with scrap-filled sacks on their curved backs, and steel-hooked staves, furtively sorting and picking among the night's débris on sidewalk and in gutter.

Here and there in front of half a dozen wrecked cafés little knots of policemen stood on the glass-littered sidewalk, in low-voiced consultation; far down the Boulevard, helmets gleamed dully through the haze where municipal cavalry were quietly riding off the mobs and gradually pushing them back toward the Montmartre and Villetta quarters, whence they had arrived.

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Mounted Municipals still sat their beautiful horses in double line across the corner of the rue Vilna and parallel streets, closing that entire quarter where, to judge from a few fitful and far-away pistol shots, the methodical apache hunt was still in progress.

And it was a strange and sinister phase of Paris that Neeland now gazed upon through the misty stillness of early morning. For there was something terrible in the sudden quiet, where the swift and shadowy fury of earliest dawn had passed: and the wrecked buildings sagged like corpses, stark and disembowelled, spilling out their dead intestines indecently under the whitening sky.

Save for the echoes of distant shots, no louder than the breaking of a splinter—save for the deadened stamp and stir of horses, a low-voiced order, the fainter clash of spurs and scabbards—an intense stillness brooded now over the city, ominously prophetic of what fateful awakening the coming sunrise threatened for the sleeping capital.

Neeland turned and looked at Ilse Dumont. She stood motionless on the sidewalk, in the clear, colourless light, staring fixedly across the street at the debris of the gaping, shattered Café des Bulgars. Her evening gown hung in filmy tinted shreds; her thick, dark hair in lustrous disorder shadowed her white shoulders; a streak of dry blood striped one delicate bare arm.

To see her standing there on the sidewalk in the full, unshadowed morning light, silent, dishevelled, scarcely clothed, seemed to him part of the ghastly unreality of this sombre and menacing vision, from which he ought to rouse himself.

She turned her head slowly; her haggard eyes met his

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without expression; and he found his tongue with the effort of a man who strives for utterance through a threatening dream:

"We can't stay here," he said. The sound of his own voice steadied and cleared his senses. He glanced down at his own attire, blood-stained, and ragged; felt for the loose end of his collar, rebuttoned it, and knotted the dragged white tie with the unconscious indifference of habit.

"What a nightmare!" he muttered to himself. "The world has been turned upside down over night." He looked up at her: "We can't stay here," he repeated. "Where do you live?"

She did not appear to hear him. She had already started to move toward the rue Vilna, where the troopers barring that street still sat their restive horses. They were watching her and her dishevelled companion with the sophisticated amusement of men who, by clean daylight, encounter fagged-out revellers of a riotous night.

Neeland spoke to her again, then followed her and took her arm.

"Where are you going?" he repeated, uneasily.

"I shall give myself up," she replied in a dull voice.

"To whom?"

"To the Municipals over there."

"Give yourself up!" he repeated. "Why?"

She passed a slender hand over her eyes as though unutterably weary:

"Neeland," she said, "I am lost already. . . . And I am very tired."

"What do you mean?" he demanded, drawing her back under a *porte-cochère*. "You live somewher

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don't you? If it's safe for you to go back to your lodgings, I'll take you there. Is it?"

"No."

"Well, then, I'll take you somewhere else. I'll find somewhere to take you——"

She shook her head:

"It is useless, Neeland. There is no chance of my leaving the city now—no chance left—no hope. It is simpler for me to end the matter this way——"

"Can't you go to the Turkish Embassy?"

She looked up at him in a surprised, hopeless way:

"Do you suppose that any Embassy ever receives a spy in trouble? Do you really imagine that any government ever admits employing secret agents, or stirs a finger to aid them when they are in need?"

"I told you I'd stand by you," he reminded her bluntly.

"You have been—kind—Neeland."

"And you have been very loyal to me, Scheherazade. I shall not abandon you."

"How can you help me? I can't get out of this city. Wherever I go, now, it will be only a matter of a few hours before I am arrested."

"The American Embassy. There is a *man* there," he reminded her.

She shrugged her naked shoulders:

"I cannot get within sight of the Trocadero before the secret police arrest me. Where shall I go? I have no passport, no papers, not even false ones. If I go to the lodgings where I expected to find shelter it means my arrest, court martial, and execution in a *caserne* within twenty-four hours. And it would involve others who trust me—condemn them instantly to a firing squad

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—if I am found by the police in their company! . . . No, Neeland. There's no hope for me. Too many know me in Paris. I took a risk in coming here when war was almost certain. I took my chances, and lost. It's too late to whimper now."

As he stared at her something suddenly brightened above them; and he looked up and saw the first sunbeam painting a chimney top with palest gold.

"Come," he said, "we've got to get out of this! We've got to go somewhere—find a taxicab and get under shelter——"

She yielded to the pressure of his arm and moved forward beside him. He halted for a moment on the curb, looking up and down the empty streets for a cab of any sort, then, with the instinct of a man for whom the Latin Quarter had once been a refuge and a home, he started across the Boulevard, his arm clasping hers.

All the housetops were glittering with the sun as they passed the ranks of the Municipal cavalry.

A young officer looked down mischievously as they traversed the Boulevard—the only moving objects in that vast and still perspective.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he murmured. "A night like that is something to remember in the winter of old age!"

Neeland heard him. The gay, bantering, irresponsible Gallic wit awoke him to himself; the rising sun, tipping the city's spires with fire, seemed to relight a little, long-forgotten flame within him. His sombre features cleared; he said confidently to the girl beside him:

"Don't worry; we'll get you out of it somehow or other. It's been a rather frightful dream, Scheherazade, nothing worse——"



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Her arm suddenly tightened against his and he turned to look at the shattered Café des Bulgars which they were passing, where two policemen stood looking at a cat which was picking its way over the mass of débris, mewing dismally.

One of the policemen, noticing them, smiled sympathetically at their battered appearance.

"Would you like to have a cat for your lively *ménage*?" he said, pointing to the melancholy animal which Neeland recognised as the dignified property of the Cercle Extranationale.

The other policeman, more suspicious, eyed Ilse Dumont closely as she knelt impulsively and picked up the homeless cat.

"Where are you going in such a state?" he asked, moving over the heaps of splintered glass toward her.

"Back to the Latin Quarter," said Neeland, so cheerfully that suspicion vanished and a faint grin replaced the official frown.

"*Allons, mes enfants,*" he muttered. "*Faut pas s'attrouper dans la rue.* Also you both are a scandal. *Allons! Filez! Houp!* The sun is up already!"

They went out across the rue Royale toward the Place de la Concorde, which spread away before them in deserted immensity and beauty.

There were no taxicabs in sight. Ilse, carrying the cat in her arms, moved beside Neeland through the deathly stillness of the city, as though she were walking in a dream. Everywhere in the pale blue sky above them steeple and dome glittered with the sun; there were no sounds from *quai* or river; no breeze stirred the trees; nothing moved on esplanade or bridge; the pale blue August sky grew bluer; the gilded tip of the obelisk glittered like a living flame.

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Neeland turned and looked up the Champs Elysées.

Far away on the surface of the immense avenue a tiny dark speck was speeding—increasing in size, coming nearer.

“A taxi,” he said with a quick breath of relief. “We’ll be all right now.”

Nearer and nearer came the speeding vehicle, rushing toward them between the motionless green ranks of trees. Neeland walked forward across the square to signal it, waited, watching its approach with a slight uneasiness.

Now it sped between the rearing stone horses, and now, swerving, swung to the left toward the rue Royale. And to his disgust and disappointment he saw it was a private automobile.

“The devil!” he muttered, turning on his heel.

At the same moment, as though the chauffeur had suddenly caught an order from within the limousine, the car swung directly toward him once more.

As he rejoined Ilse, who stood clasping the homeless cat to her breast, listlessly regarding the approaching automobile, the car swept in a swift circle around the fountain where they stood, stopped short beside them; and a woman flung open the door and sprang out to the pavement.

And Ilse Dumont, standing there in the rags of her frail gown, cuddling to her breast the purring cat, looked up to meet her doom in the steady gaze of the Princess Naïa Mistchenka.

Every atom of colour left her face, and her ashy lips parted. Otherwise, she made no sign of fear, no movement.

There was a second’s absolute silence; then the dark eyes of the Princess turned on Neeland.

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"Good heavens, James!" she said. "What has happened to you?"

"Nothing," he said gaily, "thanks to Miss Dumont——"

"To *whom?*" interrupted the Princess sharply.

"To Miss Dumont. We got into a silly place where it began to look as though we'd get our heads knocked off, Sengoun and I. I'm really quite serious, Princess. If it hadn't been for Miss Dumont——" he shrugged: "——and that is twice she has saved my idiotic head for me," he added cheerfully.

The Princess Naïa's dark eyes reverted to Ilse Dumont, and the pallid girl met them steadily enough. There was no supplication in her own eyes, no shrinking, only the hopeless tranquillity that looks Destiny in the face—the gaze riveted unflinchingly upon the descending blow.

"What are *you* doing in Paris at such a time as this?" said the Princess.

The girl's white lips parted stiffly:

"Do you need to ask?"

For a full minute the Princess bent a menacing gaze on her in silence; then:

"What do you expect from *me?*" she demanded in a low voice. And, stepping nearer: "What have you to expect from anyone in France on such a day as this?"

Ilse Dumont did not answer. After a moment she dropped her head and fumbled with the rags of her bodice, as though trying to cover the delicately rounded shoulders. A shaft of sunlight, reflected from the obelisk to the fountain, played in golden ripples across her hair.

Neeland looked at the Princess Naïa:

"What you do is none of my business," he said pleas-

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antly, "but—" he smiled at her and stepped back beside Ilse Dumont, and passed his arm through hers: "I'm a grateful beast," he added lightly, "and if I've nine lives to lose, perhaps Miss Dumont will save seven more of them before I'm entirely done for."

The girl gently disengaged his arm.

"You'll only get yourself into serious trouble," she murmured, "and you can't help me, dear Neeland."

The Princess Naïa, flushed and exasperated, bit her lip.

"James," she said, "you are behaving absurdly. That woman has nothing to fear from me now, and she ought to know it!" And, as Ilse lifted her head and stared at her: "Yes, you ought to know it!" she repeated. "Your work is ended. It ended today at sunrise. And so did mine. War is here. There is nothing further for you to do; nothing for me. The end of everything is beginning. What would your death or mine signify now, when the dawn of such a day as this is the death warrant for millions? What do we count for now, Mademoiselle Minna Minti?"

"Do you not mean to give me up, madame?"

"Give you up? No. I mean to get you out of Paris if I can. Give me your cat, mademoiselle. Please help her, James——"

"You—offer me your limousine?" stammered Ilse.

"Give that cat to me. Of course I do! Do you suppose I mean to leave you in rags with your cat on the pavement here?" And, to Neeland: "Where is Alak?"

"Gone home as fit as a fiddle. Am I to receive the hospitality of your limousine also, dear lady? Look at the state I'm in to travel with two ladies!"

The Princess Naïa's dark eyes glimmered; she tuck

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the cat comfortably against her shoulder and motioned Ilse into the car.

"I'm afraid I'll have to take you, James. What on earth has happened to you?" she added, as he put her into the car, nodded to the chauffeur, and, springing in beside her, slammed the door.

"I'll tell you in two words," he explained gaily. "Prince Erlik and I started for a stroll and landed, ultimately, in the Café des Bulgars. And presently a number of gentlemen began to shoot up the place, and Miss Dumont stood by us like a brick."

The Princess Mistchenka lifted the cat from her lap and placed it in the arms of Ilse Dumont.

"That ought to win our gratitude, I'm sure," she said politely to the girl. "We Russians never forget such pleasant obligations. There is a Cossack jingle:

"To those who befriend our friends  
Our duty never ends."

Ilse Dumont bent low over the purring cat in her lap; the Princess watched her askance from moment to moment, and Neeland furtively noted the contrast between these women—one in rags and haggard disorder; the other so trim, pretty, and fresh in her morning walking suit.

"James," she said abruptly, "we've had a most horrid night, Ruhannah and I. The child waited up for you, it seems—I thought she'd gone to bed—and she came to my room about two in the morning—the little goose—as though men didn't stay out all night!"

"I'm terribly sorry," he said contritely.

"You ought to be. . . . And Ruhannah was so disturbed that I put on something and got out of bed. And after a while"—the Princess glanced sardonically

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at Ilse Dumont—"I telephoned to various sources of information and was informed concerning the rather lively episodes of your nocturnal career with Sengoun. And when I learned that you and he had been seen to enter the Café des Bulgars, I became sufficiently alarmed to notify several people who might be interested in the matter."

"One of those people," said Neeland, smiling, "was escorted to her home by Captain Sengoun, I think."

The Princess glanced out of the window where the early morning sun glimmered on the trees as the car flew swiftly through the Champs Elysées.

"I heard that there were some men killed there last night," she said without turning.

"Several, I believe," admitted Neeland.

"Were *you* there, then?"

"Yes," he replied, uncomfortably.

"Did you know anybody who was killed, James?"

"Yes, by sight."

She turned to him:

"Who?"

"There was a man named Kestner; another named Weishelm. Three American gamblers were killed also."

"And Karl Breslau?" inquired the Princess coolly.

There was a moment's silence.

"No. I think he got away across the roofs of the houses," replied Neeland.

Ilse Dumont, bent over the cat in her lap, stared absently into its green eyes where it lay playfully patting the rags that hung from her torn bodice.

Perhaps she was thinking of the dead man where he lay in the crowded café—the dead man who had confronted her with bloodshot eyes and lifted pistol—whose voice, thick with rage, had denounced her—whose

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stammering, untaught tongue stumbled over the foreign words with which he meant to send her to her death—this dead man who once had been *her* man—long ago—very, very long ago when there was no bitterness in life, no pain, no treachery—when life was young in the Western World, and Fate gaily beckoned her, wearing a smiling mask and crowned with flowers.

“I hope,” remarked the Princess Mistchenka, “that it is sufficiently early in the morning for you to escape observation, James.”

“I’m a scandal; I know it,” he admitted, as the car swung into the rue Soleil d’Or.

The Princess turned to the drooping girl beside her and laid a gloved hand lightly on her shoulder.

“My dear,” she said gently, “there is only one chance for you, and if we let it pass it will not come again—under military law.”

Ilse lifted her head, held it high, even tilted back a little.

The Princess said:

“Twenty-four hours will be given for all Germans to leave France. But—you took your nationality from the man you married. You are American.”

The girl flushed painfully:

“I do not care to take shelter under his name,” she said.

“It is the only way. And you must get to the coast in my car. There is no time to lose. Every vehicle, private and public, will be seized for military uses this morning. Every train will be crowded; every foot of room occupied on the Channel boats. There is only one thing for you to do—travel with me to Havre as my American maid.”

“Madame—would you do that—for me?”

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"Why, I've got to," said the Princess Mistchenka with a shrug. "I am not a barbarian to leave you to a firing squad, I hope."

The car had stopped; the chauffeur descended and came around to open the door.

"Caron," said the Princess, "no servants are stirring yet. Take my key, find a cloak and bring it out—and a coat for Monsieur Neeland—the one that Captain Sengoun left the other evening. Have you plenty of gasoline?"

"Plenty, madame."

"Good. We leave for Havre in five minutes. Bring the cloak and coat quickly."

The chauffeur hastened to the door, unlocked it, disappeared, then came out carrying a voluminous wrap and a man's opera cloak. The Princess threw the one over Ilse Dumont; Neeland enveloped himself in the other.

"Now," murmured the Princess Naïa, "it will look more like a late automobile party than an ambulance after a free fight—if any early servants are watching us."

She descended from the car; Ilse Dumont followed, still clasping the cat under her cloak; and Neeland followed her.

"Be very quiet," whispered the Princess. "There is no necessity for servants to observe what we do——"

A small and tremulous voice from the head of the stairs interrupted her:

"Naïa! Is it you?"

"Hush, Ruhannah! Yes, darling, it is I. Everything is all right and you may go back to bed——"

"Naïa! Where is Mr. Neeland?" continued the voice, fearfully.



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"He is here, Rue! He is all right. Go back to your room, dear. I have a reason for asking you."

Listening, she heard a door close above; then she touched Ilse on the shoulder and motioned her to follow up the stairs. Halfway up the Princess halted, bent swiftly over the banisters:

"James!" she called softly.

"Yes?"

"Go into the pantry and find a fruit basket and fill it with whatever food you can find. Hurry, please."

He discovered the pantry presently, and a basket of fruit there. Poking about he contrived to disinter from various tins and ice-boxes some cold chicken and biscuits and a bottle of claret. These he wrapped hastily in a napkin which he found there, placed them in the basket of fruit, and came out into the hall just as Ilse Dumont, in the collar and cuffs and travelling coat of a servant, descended, carrying a satchel and a suit-case.

"Good business!" he whispered, delighted. "You're all right now, Scheherazade! And for heaven's sake, keep out of France hereafter. Do you promise?"

He had taken the satchel and bag from her and handed both, and the fruit basket, to Caron, who stood outside the door.

In the shadowy hall those two confronted each other now, probably for the last time. He took both her hands in his.

"Good-bye, Scheherazade dear," he said, with a new seriousness in his voice which made the tone of it almost tender.

"G-good-bye——" The girl's voice choked; she bent her head and rested her face on the hands he held clasped in his.

He felt her hot tears falling, felt the slender fingers

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within his own tighten convulsively; felt her lips against his hand—an instant only; then she turned and slipped through the open door.

A moment later the Princess Naïa appeared on the stairs, descending lightly and swiftly, her motor coat over her arm.

“Jim,” she said in a low voice, “it’s the wretched girl’s only chance. They know about her; they’re looking for her now. But I am trusted by my Ambassador; I shall have what papers I ask for; I shall get her through to an American steamer.”

“Princess Naïa, you are splendid!”

“You don’t think so, Jim; you never did. . . . Be nice to Rue. The child has been dreadfully frightened about you. . . . And,” added the Princess Mistchenka with a gaily forced smile, resting her hand on Neeland’s shoulder for an instant, “don’t ever kiss Rue Carew unless you mean it with every atom of your heart and soul. . . . I know the child. . . . And I know you. Be generous to her, James. All women need it, I think, from such men as you—such men as you,” she added laughingly, “who know not what they do.”

If there was a subtle constraint in her pretty laughter, if her gay gesture lacked spontaneity, he did not perceive it. His face had flushed a trifle under her sudden badinage.

“Good-bye,” he said. “You *are* splendid, and I *do* think so. I know you’ll win through.”

“I shall. I always do—except with you,” she added audaciously. And “Look for me tomorrow!” she called back to him through the open door; and slammed it behind her, leaving him standing there alone in the dark and curtained house.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE FIRST DAY

NEELAND had undressed, bathed his somewhat battered body, and had then thrown himself on the bed, fully intending to rise in a few moments and await breakfast.

But it was a very weary young man who stretched himself out for ten minutes' repose. And, when again he unclosed his eyes, the austere clock on the mantel informed him that it was five—not five in the morning either.

He had slept through the first day of general mobilisation.

Across the lowered latticed blinds late afternoon sunshine struck red. The crests of the chestnut trees in the rue Soleil d'Or had turned rosy; and a delicate mauve sky, so characteristic of Paris in early autumn, already stretched above the city like a frail tent of silk from which fragile cobweb clouds hung, tinted with saffron and palest rose.

Hoisting the latteen shades, he looked out through lace curtains into the most silent city he had ever beheld. Not that the streets and avenues were deserted: they swarmed with hurrying, silent people and with taxicabs.

Never had he seen so many taxicabs; they streamed by everywhere, rushing at high speed. They passed through the rue Soleil d'Or; the rue de la Lune fairly

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whizzed with them; the splendid avenue was merely a vista of flying taxis; and in every one of them there was a soldier.

Otherwise, except for cyclists, there seemed to be very few soldiers in Paris—an odd fact immediately noticeable.

Also there were no omnibuses to be seen, no private automobiles, no electric vehicles of any sort except great grey army trucks trundling by with a sapper at the wheel.

And, except for the whiz and rush of the motors and the melancholy siren blasts from their horns, an immense silence reigned in the streets.

There was no laughter to be heard, no loud calling, no gay and animated badinage. People who met and stopped conversed in undertones; gestures were sober and rare.

And everywhere, in the intense stillness, Red Cross flags hung motionless in the late afternoon sunshine; everywhere were posted notices warning the Republic of general mobilisation—on dead walls, on tree-boxes, on kiosques, on bulletin boards, on the façades of public and ecclesiastical buildings.

Another ordinance which Neeland could read from where he stood at the window warned all citizens from the streets after eight o'clock in the evening; and on the closed iron shutters of every shop in sight of his window were pasted white strips of paper bearing, in black letters, the same explanation:

*“Fermé à cause de la mobilisation.”*

Nowhere could he see the word “war” printed or otherwise displayed. The conspiracy of silence concerning it seemed the more ominous.

Nor, listening, could he hear the sinister voices of

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men and boys calling extra editions of the papers. There seemed to be no need for the raising of hoarse and threatening voices in the soundless capital. Men and youths of all ages traversed the avenues and streets with sheafs of fresh, damp newspapers over their ragged arms, but it was the populace who crowded after and importuned them, not they the people; and no sooner did a paper-seller appear than he was stripped of his wares and was counting his coppers under the trees before hurrying away for a fresh supply.

Neeland dressed himself in sections, always returning to the window to look out; and in this manner he achieved his toilet.

Marotte, the old butler, was on the floor below, carrying a tea tray into the wide, sunny sitting-room as Neeland descended.

"I overslept," explained the young American, "and I'm nearly starved. Is Mademoiselle Carew having tea?"

"Mademoiselle requested tea for two, sir, in case you should awake," said the old man solemnly.

Neeland watched him fussing about with cloth and table and silver.

"Have you any news?" he asked after a moment.

"Very little, Monsieur Neeland. The police have ordered all Germans into detention camps—men, women, and children. It is said that there are to be twelve great camps for these unfortunates who are to assemble in the Lycée Condorcet for immediate transportation."

Neeland thought of Ilse Dumont. Presently he asked whether any message had been received from the Princess Mistchenka.

"Madame the Princess telephoned from Havre at

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four o'clock this afternoon. Mademoiselle Carew has the message."

Neeland, reassured, nodded:

"No other news, Marotte?"

"The military have taken our automobiles from the garage, and have requisitioned the car which Madame la Princess is now using, ordering us to place it at their disposal as soon as it returns from Havre. Also, Monsieur le Capitaine Sengoun has telephoned from the Russian Embassy, but Mademoiselle Carew would not permit Monsieur to be awakened."

"What did Captain Sengoun say?"

"Mademoiselle Carew received the message."

"And did anyone else call me up?" asked Neeland, smiling.

"*Il y avait une fe—une espèce de dame,*" replied the old man doubtfully, "—who named herself Fifi la Tzigane. I permitted myself to observe to her," added the butler with dignity, "that she had the liberty of writing to you what she thought necessary to communicate."

He had arranged the tea-table. Now he retired, but returned almost immediately to decorate the table with Cloth of Gold roses.

Fussing and pottering about until the mass of lovely blossoms suited him, he finally presented himself to Neeland for further orders, and, learning that there were none, started to retire with a self-respecting dignity that was not at all impaired by the tears which kept welling up in his aged eyes, and which he always winked away with a *demi-tour* and a discreet cough correctly stifled by his dry and wrinkled hand.

As he passed out the door Neeland said:

"Are you in trouble, Marotte?"

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The old man straightened up, and a fierce pride blazed for a moment from his faded eyes:

“Not trouble, monsieur; but—when one has three sons departing for the front—*dame!*—that makes one reflect a little——”

He bowed with the unconscious dignity of a wider liberty, a subtler equality which, for a moment, left such as he indifferent to circumstances of station.

Neeland stepped forward extending his hand:

“*Bonne chance!* God be with France—and with us all who love our liberty. Luck to your three sons!”

“I thank monsieur——” He steadied his voice, bowed in the faultless garments which were his badge of service, and went his way through the silence in the house.

Neeland had walked to the long windows giving on the pretty balcony with its delicate, wrought-iron rails and its brilliant masses of geraniums.

Outside, along the Avenue, in absolute silence, a regiment of cuirassiers was passing, the level sun blazing like sheets of crimson fire across their helmets and breastplates. And now, listening, the far clatter of their horses came to his ears in an immense, unbroken, rattling resonance.

Their gold-fringed standard passed, and the sunlight on the naked sabres ran from point to hilt like liquid blood. Sons of the Cuirassiers of Morsbronn, grandsons of the Cuirassiers of Waterloo—what was their magnificent fate to be?—For splendid it could not fail to be, whether tragic or fortunate.

The American’s heart began to hammer in his breast and throb in his throat, closing it with a sudden spasm that seemed to confuse his vision for a moment and turn the distant passing regiment to a glittering stream of steel and flame.

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Then it had passed; the darkly speeding torrent of motor cars alone possessed the Avenue; and Neeland turned away into the room again.

And there, before him, stood Rue Carew.

A confused sense of unreasoning, immeasurable happiness rushed over him, and, in that sudden, astounding instant of self-revelation, self-amazement left him dumb.

She had given him both her slim white hands, and he held to them as though to find his bearings. Both were a trifle irrelevant and fragmentary.

"Do you c-care for tea, Jim? . . . What a night! What a fright you gave us. . . . There are *croissants*, too, and caviar. . . . I would not permit anybody to awaken you; and I was dying to see you——"

"I am so sorry you were anxious about me. And I'm tremendously hungry. . . . You see, Sengoun and I did not mean to remain out all night. . . . I'll help you with that tea; shall I? . . ."

He still retained her hands in his; she smiled and flushed in a breathless sort of way, and looked sometimes at the tea-kettle as though she never before had seen such an object; and looked up at him as though she had never until that moment beheld any man like him.

"The Princess Naïa has left us quite alone," she said, "so I must give you some tea." She was nervous and smiling and a little frightened and confused with the sense of their contact.

"So—I shall give you your tea, now," she repeated.

She did not mention her manual inability to perform her promise, but presently it occurred to him to release her hands, and she slid gracefully into her chair and took hold of the silver kettle with fingers that tremb



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He ate everything offered him, and then took the initiative. And he talked—Oh, heaven! How he talked! Everything that had happened to him and to Sengoun from the moment they left the rue Soleil d'Or the night before, this garrulous young man detailed with a relish for humorous circumstance and a disregard for anything approaching the tragic, which left her with an impression that it had all been a tremendous lark—indiscreet, certainly, and probably reprehensible—but a lark, for all that.

Fireworks, shooting, noise, and architectural destruction he admitted, but casualties he skimmed over, and of death he never said a word. Why should he? The dead were dead. None concerned this young girl now—and, save one, no death that any man had died there in the shambles of the Café des Bulgars could ever mean anything to Rue Carew.

Some day, perhaps, he might tell her that Brandes was dead—not where or how he had died—but merely the dry detail. And she might docket it, if she cared to, and lay it away among the old, scarcely remembered, painful things that had been lived, and now were to be forgotten forever.

The silence of intensest interest, shy or excited questions, and the grey eyes never leaving his—this was her tribute.

Grey eyes tinged with golden lights, now clear with suspense, now brilliant at a crisis, now gentle, wondering, troubled, as he spoke of Ilse Dumont and the Russian girl, now charmingly vague as her mind outstripped his tongue and she divined something of the sturdy part he had played—golden-grey eyes that grew exquisite with her pride in him, tender with solicitude for him in dangers already passed away—this was her tribute

## THE FIRST DAY

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Engaging grey eyes of a girl with the splendour and mystery of womanhood possessing her—attracting him, too, fascinating him, threatening, conquering, possessing him—this, the Greek gift of Rue Carew, her tribute.

And he took all, forgetting that the Greeks bore gifts; or, perhaps, remembering, rejoicing, happy in his servitude, he took into his heart and soul the tribute this young girl offered, a grateful, thankful captive.

The terrible cataclysm impending, menacing the world, they seemed powerless, yet, to grasp and comprehend and understand.

Outside, the street rippled and roared with the interminable clatter of passing cavalry: the girl looked into the eyes of the boy across the tea-table, and her young eyes, half fearful yet enchanted, scarce dared divine what his eyes were telling her while his hurrying tongue chattered irrelevancies.

Three empires, two kingdoms, and a great republic resounded with the hellish din of arming twenty million men. Her soft lips were touched with the smile of youth that learns for the first time it is beloved; her eyes of a child, exquisite, brooding, rested with a little more courage now on his—were learning, little by little, to sustain his gaze, endure the ardour that no careless, laughing speech of his could hide or dim or quench.

In the twilight of the streets there was silence, save for the rush of motors and the recurrent trample of armed men. But the heart of Rue Carew was afire with song—and every delicate vein in her ran singing to her heart.

There was war in the Eastern world; and palace and chancellery were ablaze. But they spoke of the West—of humble places and lowly homes; of still wood-

## THE DARK STAR

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lands where mosses edged the brooks; of peaceful villages they both had known, where long, tree-shaded streets slept in the dappled shadow under the sun of noon.

Marotte came, silent, self-respecting, very grey and tranquil in his hour of trial.

There were two letters for Neeland, left by hand. And, when the old man had gone away bearing his silver tray among his heavier burdens:

“Read them,” nodded Rue Carew.

He read them both aloud to her: the first amused them a little—not without troubling them a little, too:

MONSIEUR NEELAND:

It is the Tzigane, Fifi, who permits herself the honour of addressing you.

Breslau escaped. With him went the plans, it seems. You behaved admirably in the Café des Bulgars. A Russian comrade has you and Prince Erlik to remember in her prayers.

You have done well, monsieur. Now, your task is ended. Go back to the Western World and leave us to end this battle between ourselves.

It is written and confirmed by the stars that what the Eastern World has sown it shall now reap all alone.

We Tziganes know. You should not mock at our knowledge. For there is a dark star, Erlik, named from the Prince of Hell. And last night it was in conjunction with the red star, Mars. None saw it; none has ever beheld the dark star, Erlik.

But we Tziganes know. We have known for five thousand years that Erlik hung aloft, followed by ten black moons. Ask your astronomers. But we Tziganes knew this before there ever were astronomers!

Therefore, go home to your own land, monsieur. The Prince of Hell is in the heavens. The Yellow Devil shall see the Golden Horn again. Empires shall totter and fall. Little American, stand from under.

## THE FIRST DAY

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Adieu! We Tziganes wish you well—Fifi and Nini of the Jardin Russe.

“Adieu, *beau jeune homme!* And—to her whom you shall take with you—homage, good wishes, good augury, and adieux!”

“To her whom you shall take with you,” he repeated, looking at Rue Carew.

The girl blushed furiously and bent her head, and her slender fingers grew desperately busy with her handkerchief.

Neeland, as nervous as she, fumbled with the seal of the remaining letter, managed finally to break it, glanced at the writing, then laughed and read:

MY DEAR COMRADE NEELAND:

I get my thousand lances! Congratulate me! Were you much battered by that *canaille* last night? I laugh until I nearly burst when I think of that absurd *bousculade!*

That girl I took with me is all right. I'm going to Petrograd! I'm going on the first opportunity by way of Switzerland.

What happiness, Neeland! No more towns for me, except those I take. No more politics, no more diplomacy! I shall have a thousand lances to do my talking for me. Hurrah!

Neeland, I love you as a brother. Come to the East with me. You shall make a splendid trooper! Not, of course, a Terek Cossack. A Cossack is God's work. A Terek Cossack is born, not made.

But, good heavens! There is other most excellent cavalry in the world, I hope! Come with me to Russia. Say that you will come, my dear comrade Neeland, and I promise you we shall amuse ourselves when the world's dance begins——

“Oh!” breathed the girl, exasperated. “Sengoun is a fool!”

## THE DARK STAR

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Neeland looked up quickly from his letter; then his face altered, and he rose; but Rue Carew was already on her feet; and she had lost most of her colour—and her presence of mind, too, it seemed, for Neeland's arms were half around her, and her hands were against his shoulders.

Neither of them spoke; and he was already amazed and rather scared at his own incredible daring—already terribly afraid of this slender, fragrant creature who stood rigid and silent within the circle of his arm, her head lowered, her little, resisting hands pressed convulsively against his breast.

And after a long time the pressure against his breast slowly relaxed; her restless fingers moved nervously against his shoulders, picked at the lapels of his coat, clung there as he drew her head against his breast.

The absurd beating of his heart choked him as he stammered her name; he dropped his head beside her hot and half hidden cheek. And, after a long, long time, her face stirred on his breast, turned a very little toward him, and her young lips melted against his.

So they stood through the throbbing silence in the slowly darkening room, while the street outside echoed with the interminable trample of passing cavalry, and the dim capital lay like a phantom city under the ghostly lances of the searchlights as though probing all Heaven to the very feet of God in search of reasons for the hellish crime now launched against the guiltless Motherland.

And high among the planets sped the dark star, Erlik, unseen by men, rushing through viewless interstellar space, hurled out of nothing by the Prince of Hell into the nothing toward which all Hell is speeding, too; and

## *THE FIRST DAY*

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whither it shall one day fade and disappear and pass away forever.

“My darling——”

“Oh, Jim—I have loved you all my life,” she whispered. And her young arms crept up and clung around his neck.

“My darling Rue—my little Rue Carew——”

Outside the window an officer also spoke through the unbroken clatter of passing horsemen which filled the whole house with a hollow roar. But she heard her lover’s voice alone as in a hushed and magic world; and in her girl’s enchanted ears his words were the only sounds that stirred a heavenly quiet that reigned between the earth and stars.



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